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EDITORIAL OFFICE
Warners Group Publications plc
The Chocolate Factory
5 Clarendon Road
London N22 6XJ
Tel: 020 8881 0550
Fax: 020 8881 0990
Email: editorial@birdwatch.co.uk
Web: www.birdwatch.co.uk
Facebook: www.facebook.com/birdwatchmagazine
Twitter: @BirdwatchExtra

Managing Editor: Dominic Mitchell
Assistant Editor: Rebecca Armstrong
Staff Writer: David Callahan
Head of Design: Lynn Wright
Optics Editor: Mike Alibone
Photographic Consultant: Steve Young
Identification Consultants:
Andy Stoddart and Keith Vinicombe

Publisher: Rob McDonnell
Advertisement Sales Manager:
Ian Lycett (020 8881 0550)
Advertisement Design:
Cathy Herron (01778 391167)
Marketing Executive:
Sarah Stephens (01778 395007)
Office Manager: Heather O'Connor

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ADVISORY PANEL

Tim Appleton MBE, Mike Fraser, Chris Harbard, Erik Hirschfeld, Stephen Moss, Killian Mullarney, Bill Oddie OBE, Hadram Shirihai, Keith Vinicombe, Martin Woodcock, Steve Young.



SHORT-EARED OWL BY STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



Contents



IN the quiet news period of the summer holidays, frivolous stories often compete with factual reporting on the front pages of national newspapers. This year's 'silly season' has been worse than most, with national media attention focused on the perceived problem of 'aggressive' gulls. It stemmed from three incidents involving attacks on pets in the West Country, leading Prime Minister David Cameron to call for "a big conversation" about whether a cull was needed.

At least the Prime Minister admitted he knew little about the subject. It's a shame that those responsible for the ensuing press coverage weren't so frank about their ignorance. Instead, we were treated to such idiot reportage as 'Moment killer seagull turns cannibal ...' (*Daily Mail*), 'Seagull terror: lock up your babies' (*Daily Star*), 'Psycho seagulls keep out illegals' (*Daily Star* again), 'Reign of terror by vicious seagulls' (*Express*) and, from an American perspective, 'Killer seagulls are terrorising animals in the UK and experts fear a baby might be next' (*Time* magazine).

Ah, 'experts'. Step forward the much-

quoted Gull Awareness Group, apparently the creation of a single Cheltenham resident with no declared expertise beyond hating gulls and launching a petition to have them culled. Tabloid hacks would surely do better to talk to the RSPB, which has been at pains to point out that the main species involved, Herring Gull, is a declining Red-listed Bird of Conservation Concern, and shouldn't simply be culled. The RSPB has backed the call for a gull "conversation", but even though the charity will bring scientific evidence to bear in the debate, is this really the answer to an issue over-hyped through irresponsible media coverage?

Common-sense measures to change refuse practices, humanely deter roof-nesting gulls and stop people feeding them in problem areas would surely go a long way to reducing nuisance issues, even if there are wider questions about population dynamics and the marine environment that need addressing. In the meantime, let's hope the tabloid press find a more productive way of filling column inches before the summer's over.

Dominic Mitchell

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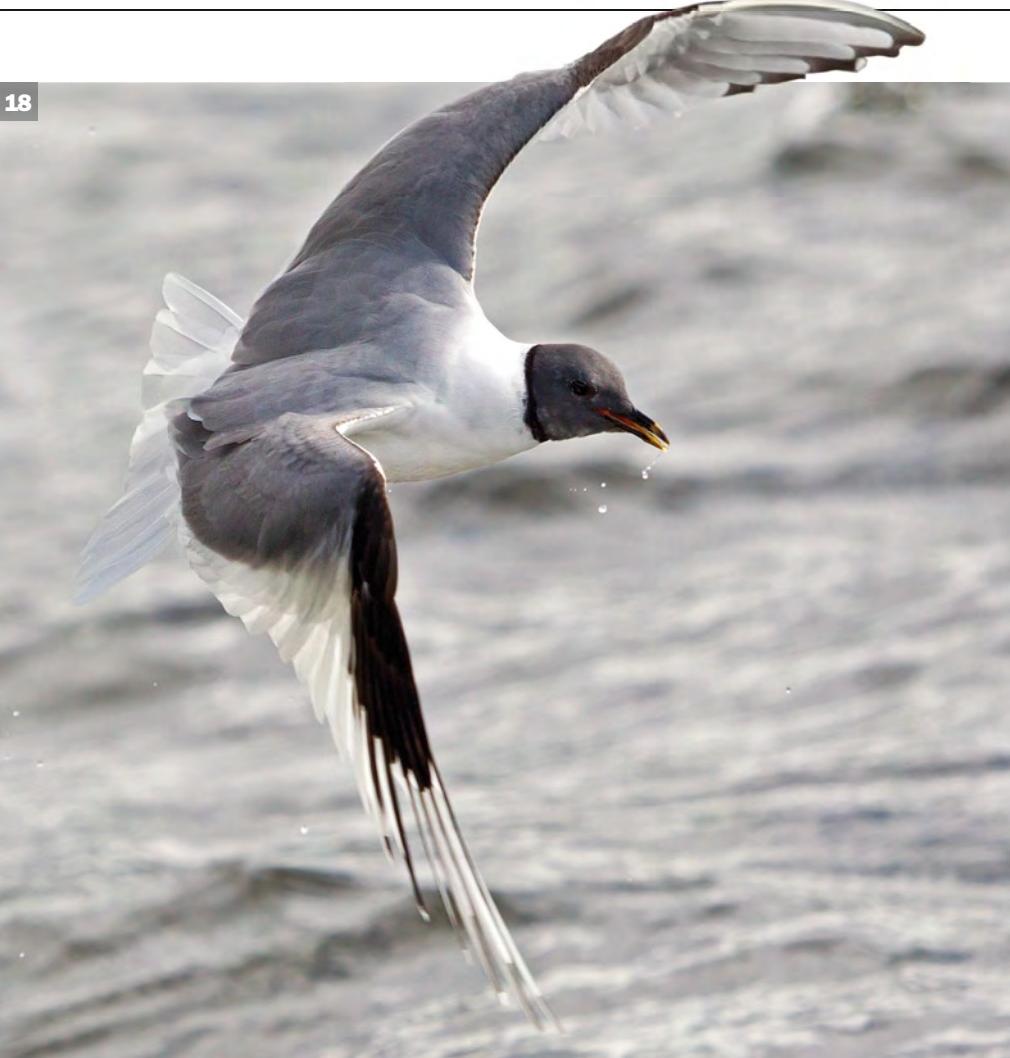


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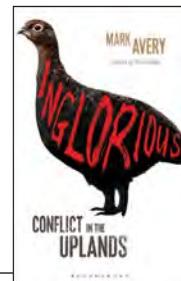
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PHOTOS: SHUKI CHELED



European Bat-eater!

Birding around the Judean plains with a friend towards the end of June, photographer Shuki Cheled was near the village of Nahala when the two encountered a European Bee-eater with something large in its bill. The bird eventually flew closer and the two were amazed to see that the prey was actually a bat, which has been tentatively identified as a Kuhl's Pipistrelle.

The bat was clearly alive and flapping around at first, but the bee-eater proceeded to hit the bat against branches until it died, just like the species does with its more typical prey of wasps and bees. The bird spent the following minutes trying to swallow the bat without success, flipping it over and over. Eventually it flew off, with the bat still in its beak, so whether it was able to complete its meal remains a mystery.

This is a truly remarkable episode: European Bee-eaters are known to feed on many flying insects and occasionally take terrestrial prey such as termites, caterpillars and grubs and even small lizards, but none of the standard references mentions mammalian prey, and certainly not bats. It has been suggested that the pipistrelle made the mistake of roosting in the bee-eater's nest cavity and the bird was opportunistically attempting to eat a perceived threat. ■

FINDER'S REPORT

Great godwit almighty!

Checking for waders on the off-chance during a seasonal ebb, **Dermot Breen** had the shock of his birding life when he immediately found a first for Ireland

ALL PHOTOS: DERMOT BREEN



The Hudsonian Godwit was certainly flighty but settled for about half an hour or so, allowing Dermot to examine its cogent features and take some photos. Informative though the close shots of the bird on the ground are, none are as atmospheric and scene-setting as the images of it flying against the very much atypical background of the Irish coastal landscape.

Hudsonian Godwit: Inishdawros, Co Galway, 22 July 2015

I decided to head down to the Ballyconneely area late in the day on 22 July to have a quick look around. As I was passing Inishdawros, an area of exposed sand interspersed with seaweed-covered rocky outcrops, I noticed that the tide was out.

Like many other wader sites in the Connemara area of Galway, Inishdawros generally holds very low number of waders even during the heights of autumn and winter, and I had my first notable bird there only last September in the form of a Curlew Sandpiper. The area has received scant birding attention until relatively recently. In the last 10 years, though, we've managed to pick up 15 Dotterel, 10 American Golden Plover, a White-rumped Sandpiper, at least 20 Pectoral Sandpipers, five Buff-breasted Sandpipers, a Long-billed Dowitcher and a

Lesser Yellowlegs.

The great majority of the Nearctic vagrants only appear from the second week of September onwards and most of these are predominately juveniles. We've only ever had one juvenile Pectoral Sandpiper and a second-calendar-year American Golden Plover in August, so you can imagine that I certainly wasn't expecting much on this early date.

I wanted to check through the small waders, and the Sanderling in particular. I occasionally come across the odd colour-ringed bird, and some of these have returned for several years running now. There were around 30 Ringed Plover and 12 Dunlin in their usual spot, along with an adult Little Tern with two flying juveniles.

I had driven out across the strand, but decided to park back on the mainland side and return to try to take a few more photos, and I didn't want to get cut off

by the incoming tide. At least I would be able to wade back in if it came to the worst. The terns quickly left but I decided to check one area in which they had been feeding a few minutes beforehand. Suddenly a large wader flew from my left to right and dropped behind a large rock.

As it passed within 30 m of me, it banked twice and appeared to land. I didn't have time to raise my binoculars, but even with my naked eye I could see that it had entirely black underwing coverts, rusty underparts and a clean white rump offset by a black tail. It couldn't be anything else but a Hudsonian Godwit – bloody hell!

My heart rate instantly skyrocketed, and I just prayed that the bird would stay still long enough for a record shot. As I peeked my head over the rock, a few Common Redshank and Greenshank flushed immediately, calling as they went – not what I needed. Thankfully, the bird

was standing on the water's edge, looking almost like a big summer-plumaged dowitcher for a split second.

I watched and photographed the godwit for about 20 minutes before it got up and flew in a big arc around the strand, but it quickly appeared to land among more seaweed-covered rocks. There was no sign of it for about 30 minutes, but I then checked the original spot and, much to my relief, it was back again. I ran back to the van to get my tripod and scope, and it was still in the same spot on my return. After just 10 minutes, it got up again and disappeared.

The tide was now rapidly rising, and I had to head back to the mainland side of the strand before being completely cut off. Around this time, a family with a dog in tow walked through the area I last saw the bird land in, and I never saw it after this. I had picked it up at about 4.25 pm and last saw it at 5.25 pm.



Seen in profile side-by-side, the brief Galway bird (above left) is clearly a different individual from the long-staying Meare Heath, Somerset, bird which turned up in April (above right). Note in particular the more barred appearance of the flanks of Somerset bird along with the paler reddish colour on the belly, as well as its longer bill, darker head, the presence of more white on the primary coverts and a stronger supercilium behind the eye.

The nearest birders both live in Galway city, which on a good day is an hour's drive away, but due to rush-hour traffic and road works it was nearer to 90 minutes before they managed to get on site, which was unfortunately too late. A few others from Counties Dublin, Cork and Kerry inevitably missed it, as did the 15 or so who arrived the following day.

This will be the first record of this species for the Republic, if accepted by the Irish Rare Bird Committee. It would appear

that this is a different individual from the one that was seen in Somerset this April and May. While that bird was probably a female, the Galway one is probably a male. Males are supposed to leave the breeding grounds earlier than females, from late June and from mid-July respectively.

Compared to the British bird, the Irish individual had fewer and weaker black bars on a brighter rusty belly and flanks, but with bolder black barring on the undertail coverts, fewer

white tips to the under primary coverts, a weaker supercilium behind the eye, a whiter head contrasting with more heavy streaking on the neck, and it seemed closer to Bar-tailed Godwit in size. It's been some time since I've managed to find myself a lifer in Ireland, but this was a great one to pick up considering how scarce the species is in North America, with a total population estimated at just 70,000 birds. It just goes to show anything can turn up anywhere at any time. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded:

Blacktoft Sands RSPB, East Yorkshire, 10 September-3 October 1981.

Last recorded:

Meare Heath, Somerset, 25 April-3 May 2015.

Previous British records:

3 (including the pending Somerset bird from this spring)

Previous Irish records:

0

Mega rating:

★★★★★



Superficially resembling Black-tailed Godwit in flight due to its square white rump and black tail, Hudsonian has a much weaker white wing-bar and a black underwing. Even from behind, the more upturned bill (even more so than in Bar-tailed) is apparent, while the legs project beyond the tail as in Black-tailed, but not quite as far. The pale grey head can also be seen here, contrasting with its reddish-brown underparts.



Bee-eater déjà vu

After a sizeable influx in the spring, many suggested that bee-eaters might breed again – and so it was, but in the hilly North-West rather than southern England.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE: NICK FRANKLIN

An exciting sight anywhere in Britain, the presence of so many European Bee-eaters at once in the country led many to suspect that a breeding attempt could be afoot – and they were right.

European Bee-eaters: Lower Gelt Quarry, Brampton, Cumbria, summer 2015

TWO pairs of European Bee-eaters were already apparently feeding young in two nests when the RSPB announced the

exciting news that the species had bred again in Britain, this time near Brampton, Cumbria, rather than the Isle of Wight like

last year (see *Birdwatch* 267: 10-11).

The habitat this time was a working quarry rather than a sand-bank, but six adult birds – two breeding pairs and two ‘helpers’ – had been present on site since mid-June. Their presence remained unannounced as they were viewed as potential breeders from the outset.

The young had already hatched and, with the actions of egg collectors now no longer a problem, news was released as the adult birds could be seen flying to and fro from the nest tunnels carrying insect food for their offspring.

This year’s site is less than 50 miles as the bee-eater flies from the site in Co Durham in which the species famously nested in 2002. Breeding attempts have been intermittent since, with a widely publicised but unsuccessful attempt in Herefordshire in 2005 and then the successful breeding on the Isle of Wight last year.

With two



While the RSPB’s watchpoint was some distance from the nest to keep the birds safe from disturbance, images of either of the breeding pairs could be taken with patience.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE: WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM

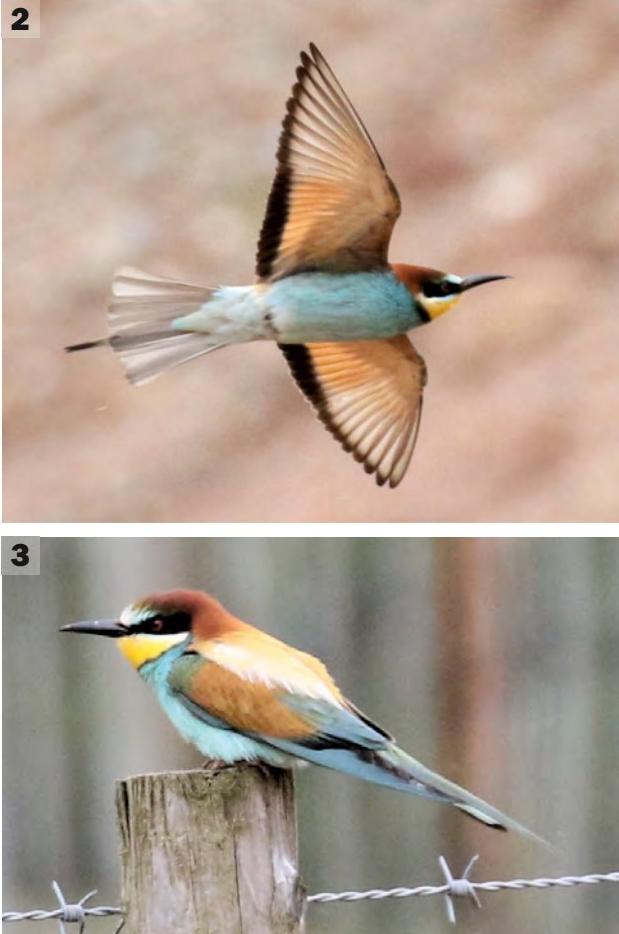
consecutive years now hosting breeding in Britain, many are optimistic about the species colonising, following the success of other southern or Mediterranean Basin species such as Little and Great Egrets.

The RSPB was keen to provide a public viewing point, and Hanson Aggregates and the landowner shared the belief that the location of Lower Gelt Quarry offered the perfect opportunity, with good parking and potential observation points about 200 m from the birds' nest tunnels.

The first of many?

The RSPB's Mark Thomas said: "Bee-eater sightings have really been on the increase in recent springs and we're delighted to confirm they are breeding in Britain for the second consecutive summer. Pushed northwards by climate change, it is highly likely that these exotic birds will soon become established visitors to our shores, [partly with] thanks to partnerships like this one with Hanson."

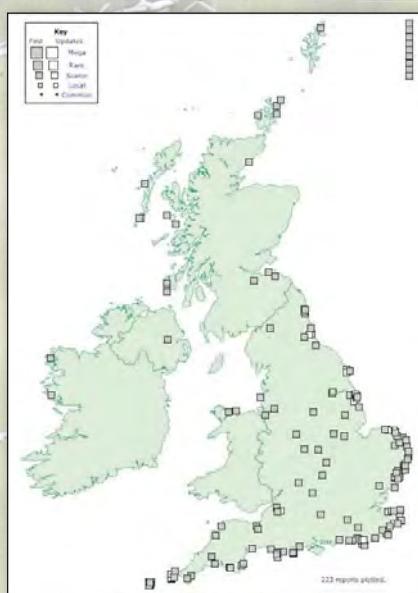
In fact, there has been a notable influx of



1 Pair-bonding behaviour was evident right from the start, and could still be witnessed by visitors after the news was announced. European Bee-eater is a very sociable species, usually nesting in colonies, with unmated adults acting as 'helpers' to breeding pairs.

2 Distinctive in flight, the birds drew attention to themselves with their frenetic activity.

3 Their chosen quarry provided many suitable perches and posts on which to rest, and from which to hunt the large insects on which the species specialises in feeding.



This map showing all reports of European Bee-eater in Britain this year demonstrates the extent of the invasion. Oddly, the first bird was seen in Co Durham on 11 April, but the main flood of incoming birds occurred on the south and east coasts, although single birds and even flocks soon ventured inland. Lower Gelt Quarry is inland from the Solway Estuary, and must stand as one of the less likely places to expect to find breeding bee-eaters in Britain, and is indeed well away from the main spread of this spring's influx. A few birds even reached the west coast of Ireland, indicating a concerted push by the species.

European Bee-eaters this spring, which began when a single bird flew east calling at Greatham Creek, Co Durham, on 11 April. Another individual was seen in South Yorkshire the next day, followed by the first group on 19th, when a flock of five was seen in a cemetery at Dover, Kent. Ones, two and threes featured highly on BirdGuides news throughout May, and then

a group of six was noted in Lincolnshire.

Parties all over

In early June, five more followed at Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, then four at Mawgan, Cornwall, with five at Bradworthy, Devon. By 11 June, three had reached Orkney, while at least 10 were seen at Glynde, East Sussex, on 22nd. Various numbered groups of between five and 11 were reported into July, but clearly one group of six had already stayed put and was preparing to breed, though with so many mobile flocks it is impossible to say which individuals were involved. It is also impossible to say how many birds were present overall for the same reason, but as we went to press there had been 139 individual reports of well over 200 birds, both singles and in flocks. Very few records came from Ireland, but the Channel Islands also saw flocks into double figures.

In an official statement on the Cumbrian nesting birds, Hanson UK's Martin Crow said: "We often have to cordon off areas in our quarries where Sand Martins and Little Ringed Plovers are breeding, but a bee-eater sighting was a surprise to us all. Great credit goes to the employees at Low Gelt for recognising and protecting these birds."

At the time of writing, the viewpoint was still in operation from 8 am until 8 pm daily, with RSPB staff and telescopes on hand. ■

In what was almost a repeat of its behaviour in Suffolk, the Black-browed Albatross appeared on a coastal pool at Agger Tange, Denmark, on 1 August, looking just as incongruous among the Mute Swans and Cormorants.



A very wandering albatross

A casual visit to a hide at a popular RSPB reserve did not promise much in mid-summer, least of all a huge South Atlantic tubenose.

Black-browed Albatross:
Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk,
12 July 2015

AN adult Black-browed Albatross had been frequenting the Northern Gannet colony on Heligoland, Germany, since 19 April this year, and was surely the individual which first appeared there in spring 2014.

Despite the apparent attractions of a seething colony of large seabirds, it sometimes disappeared for days, even wandering to Denmark on occasion. Such intermittent and frustrating erratic behaviour had already raised hopes among some of the bird making the relatively short North Sea crossing to reach the east coast

of Britain, however unlikely it might have seemed.

Reports of albatrosses often seem to come to nothing, so the news that one had been photographed on one of the scrapes at Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, on Sunday 12 July was greeted sceptically, even when a photo appeared on Twitter. However, it soon emerged that the sighting was absolutely airtight, having been first spotted by RSPB volunteer Ian Salkeld, and photographed by visitor Peter Hobbs, as well as seen by three others in the South Hide.

Apparently, Ian was looking at the pool behind the hide while the others checked the front, and calmly said "Albatross" to all-round incredulity as he pointed out a large black-and-

white bird on the water between two Mute Swans, just 20 metres or so away.

Within a few minutes, but fortunately after a few images had been captured as proof, the bird then started running on the water and took off, heading over the shingle bank to sea. It had been present for less than five minutes, all told.

Despite the understandable desire of others on site to see the bird, and the frantic searches that ensued, the albatross had disappeared for good. Minsmere RSPB Site Manager Adam Rowlands confirmed the identification as Black-browed Albatross, and the bird was later assessed to be the same as the Heligoland individual from the photographs.

At the time of writing, the Black-browed Albatross was back on the Continental side of the North Sea, now frequently visiting Denmark, and continuing to cause wistful yearnings in a new generation of British birders who need the species since the twitchable Sula Sgeir, Outer Hebrides, bird stopped returning in 2007. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Linton, Cambridgeshire, 9 July 1897.

Last recorded: Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, 26 May 2010.

Previous British records:
28

Previous Irish records: 11
Mega rating: ★★★★



This French-ringed juvenile Black Stork hung around intermittently at Spurn YWT, East Yorkshire, from 4-10 August.

Black storks down

After the bee-eaters, another Euro-influx took place.

PERHAPS overshadowed by the extraordinary influx of European Bee-eaters (see pages 10-11), another invasion from the Continent has featured a much rarer species – Black Stork.

Though several birds had been seen in Britain after an individual flew over Old Hunstanton, Norfolk, in the evening of 21 May, reports picked up in June, but then no new birds were seen in July. Then, on 28 July, a belatedly reported juvenile at Wenham Marsh, Suffolk, heralded a rapid increase in sightings as birds appeared in East and North Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Aberdeenshire, Staffordshire, Kent

and Dorset in rapid and consecutive succession.

A clue to the birds' origins came in the form of a couple of colour-ringed juveniles. At least two birds – the juveniles at Loch of Strathbeg, Aberdeenshire, and Spurn YWT, East Yorkshire, were sibling Black Storks ringed as nestlings in a forest near Bossus-lès-Rumigny, Ardennes, France, on 3 June 2015.

It is not known exactly how many birds were involved in the influx as some individuals were highly mobile, but there were at least five, and possibly one or two more. ■



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Rarities: July 2015

The Least and the best



Return wader passage got under way in earnest in July, and featured two notable 'Yanks' in the west.

Josh Jones reports.



Least Sandpiper dispersal in North America brought this classic worn summer adult to the Big Pool on St Agnes, Scilly, from 16-24 July. Inset left: the proximity of the local House Sparrows brings home the diminutive size of the species.

KRIS WEBB

After the 32-year wait for a twitchable Hudsonian Godwit was finally relieved in Somerset this spring, few were banking on the appearance of another in 2015. But that's exactly what happened when Galway birder Dermot Breen discovered a stunning summer-plumaged bird at Inishdawros, near Ballyconneely, west Connemara, on 22nd (see pages 8-9).

Constituting the first Irish record of this attractive Nearctic shorebird, many were expecting



MARTIN GOODEY photos to show it to be the same individual first found on the Somerset Levels in late April. On the contrary, the Galway bird, with its noticeably shorter bill and rich rusty-red underparts seemingly diagnosing it as a male, was clearly a different individual. Unfortunately it stayed for not

much more than an hour before disappearing, with no further sign by the month's end.

Small reward

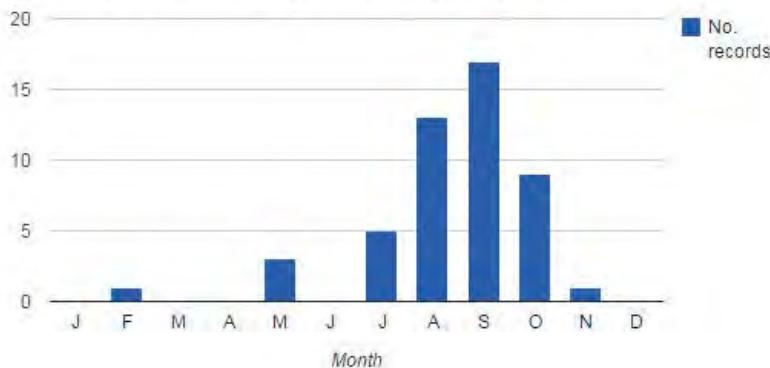
Another shorebird highlight was Scilly's third Least Sandpiper, a smart adult favouring the Big Pool on St Agnes from 16-24th. Least Sandpiper is one of those deceptively rare species that arguably borders on 'mega' status – the last British record also came from Scilly (a juvenile on Tresco in October 2011) and the last in Ireland was in August 2012. This is, incidentally, the sixth July record and the earliest

ever 'autumn' occurrence.

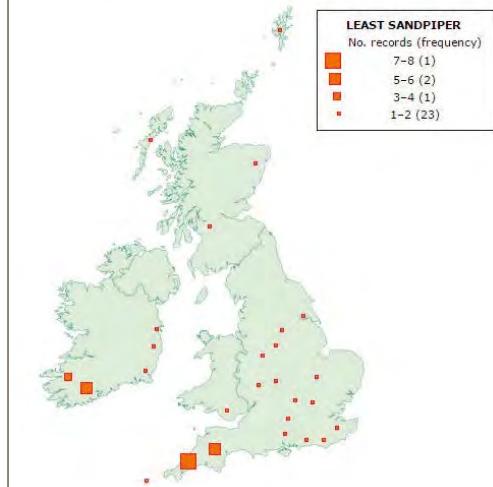
Slightly less galling, but still quite gripping nonetheless, was news on 11th that the remains of a Cedar Waxwing had been found in St David's, Pembrokeshire, on 27 June. The grip factor was of course reduced by the fact that the bird had been found dead, but there have now been four Cedar Waxwings in Britain and Ireland this year, with none seen by more than a handful of people.

Regular readers of our Western Palearctic news will be familiar with the Black-browed Albatross that has been present in Germany for a second summer

Monthly distribution of accepted Least Sandpiper reports



Distribution of accepted Least Sandpiper reports by county



Above: August and September are the big months for Least Sandpiper in Britain, according to BirdGuides.com statistics, but a few have made it across the pond in July. **Right:** fittingly with the preponderance of Least Sandpiper records in Cornwall on the BirdGuides.com map and reports of many other American waders on the isles, the St Agnes bird is the third for Scilly.



KRIS WEBB

PETER GARRITY

Above left: this 'Turkestan Shrike' (Isabelline Shrike of the form *phoenicuroides*) was an unseasonal one-day bird on St Martin's, Scilly, on 2 July; of the 95 accepted records, there has only ever been one July record before – on Anglesey in August 1998. **Above right:** Old Moor RSPB, South Yorks, has been home to this adult male Little Bittern since 30 June, and though elusive at times, it has proved to be an understandably popular and entertaining attraction at the Dearne Valley reserve.

Despite its distinctive humbug-striped head pattern and small size, the Broad-billed Sandpiper at Snettisham RSPB, Norfolk, from 18–26th could be difficult to spot in the masses of Dunlins, Common Redshanks, Knot and Black-tailed Godwits in the huge wader roost there.



JOHN D'ARCY

running. On the afternoon of 12th, this bird made an arguably overdue first-known visit to the English east coast, when it was seen and photographed on a pool near Minsmere RSPB's South Hide (see page 12). Lingering for just minutes, the bird soon powered back out to sea and was in Denmark four days later. Here's hoping for a more prolonged visit in the near future.

West Sussex's Hudsonian Whimbrel lingered in the Pagham Harbour area until 27th, save a brief excursion past Selsey Bill on 12th, and generally favoured the Church Norton side of the harbour (see last month, pages 8–9). The Greater Yellowlegs in Hampshire also lingered for much of the month at Titchfield Haven (see *Birdwatch* 277: 16), though could not be found after 24th after a long spell of reliability that stretches back to early May. A Broad-billed Sandpiper could be found in the high-tide roost at Snettisham, Norfolk, for nine days from 18th and typically proved popular. Disappointingly, the Black-winged Stilt breeding attempt failed at Cliffe Pools, Kent, though at least one adult could still be seen mid-month.

A Laughing Gull reported from Portnahaven, Islay, Argyll, on 21st had apparently been present intermittently for about a month, but could not be found thereafter.

MICK RODWELL



All five Caspian Terns seen this year have been brief, and the same holds true of this bird (centre front) at Holland Haven, Essex, on 1 August, which was present for just a few minutes mid-morning.

Earlier in July the Franklin's Gull remained at Lough Beg, Co Londonderry, on 4th. In Kent, the adult Bonaparte's Gull was reported regularly from Oare Marshes throughout the month.

July proved great for Gull-billed Tern sightings throughout the country. Most confounding was a co-operative adult on the Teign Estuary at Kingsteignton, Devon, from 12-17th – the second county record of 2015 following a bird on the Exe Estuary in May. Another showed for much of the late afternoon and evening at Burton Mere Wetlands, Cheshire, on 3rd, closely following a record from Hayle Estuary, Cornwall, on 1st. Another briefly visited Cley Marshes, Norfolk, on 12th, with that bird perhaps also accounting for a fly-by at Chapel Point, Lincs, on 16th.

Elusive bittern

After being found right at the end of June, the male Little Bittern continued to be seen at Old Moor, South Yorks, until 9th, but became increasingly elusive. What was presumably the same bird was then at Swillington Ings, West Yorks, on 11-12th before reports from Old Moor on 14th (and intermittently to 28th) seemed to confirm that it had moved back to its original haunt. Furthermore, a report was received mid-month that the male was still

at Lakenheath Fen RSPB. The Squacco Heron at Southease on 3rd was a fourth for East Sussex and the first twitchable bird in the county for almost 20 years.

A juvenile Black Stork at Wenhampton Marsh, Suffolk, on 28th proved the precursor to a series of records in early August.

Seawatching proved fairly quiet throughout July, although a Barolo Shearwater was seen for several minutes off Pendine, Cornwall, during the morning of 29th – records of this declining species are always important.

A Snowy Owl was seen on Arranmore Island, Co Donegal, on 19th. Late summer records have been a feature on the island in recent years, with a male present from 18 July-10 September 2012 and again from May to September the following year. It seems realistic to assume that this latest report refers to the same individual.

Belated news from Pembrokeshire concerned a male

In contrast to the Caspian Terns this year, the Gull-billed Tern found at Kingsteignton, Devon on 12th stuck around until 17th, giving county birders and visitors plenty of time to check it out.



TED PRESSEY

Black-headed Bunting on the path at St Justinian on 29 June – unlike the aforementioned Cedar Waxwing it was very much alive, but again birders missed out. This was the third sighting of a male Black-headed Bunting in the Welsh county this year, but it is not known whether these involve the same individual.

Rare passerines were otherwise thin on the ground, but a Paddyfield Warbler was on the Isle of Noss, Shetland, from 22nd onwards. Summer

occurrences are far from unknown: there have been two previous July records (in Orkney and Dorset), as well as five in August and 12 in June. A little more unusual in mid-summer is Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll, and the occurrence of a bird at Burravoe, Yell, on 11th was significant.

A male 'Turkestan' Shrike was an excellent find on St Martin's, Scilly, late afternoon on 2nd, but it was not seen again.

This is just the second July Isabelline Shrike following a long-staying female at Cemlyn, Anglesey, back in 1998. ■

- For full details of all July's sightings, go to www.birguides.com. To receive free illustrated weekly sightings summaries and other news, sign up at bit.ly/BGWeeklyNews.



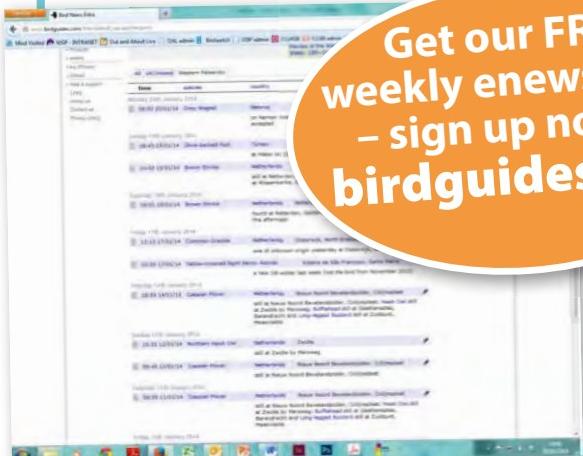
CALUM LAMONT

A fixture for most of the summer since it reappeared on 11 April (having been seen for one day on 11 January), the Titchfield Haven NNR, Hants, Greater Yellowlegs continued to show well for most of the month, before disappearing on 24th.



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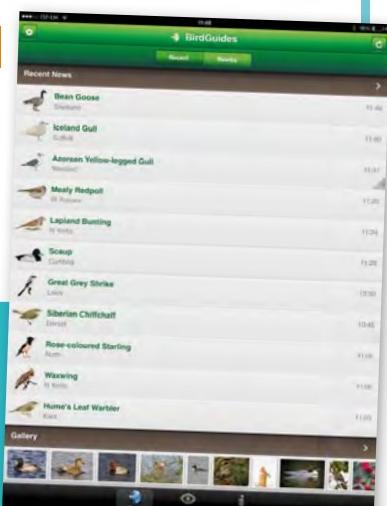
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Scarcities: July 2015



Bee-eater invasion pays dividends



Two pairs of European Bee-eaters breeding in Cumbria was the highlight of the month, while a Red-footed Falcon entertained photographers, reports **Josh Jones.**

CHRIS COOK

Thrilling news that two pairs of European Bee-eaters were breeding in Cumbria (see pages 10-11) was an uplifting way in which to sign off an otherwise typically quiet July.

A total of six adults were frequenting a quarry near Brampton and had been doing so since mid-June, though the RSPB was rightfully hesitant to release news until the young hatched. With the adults making increasingly frequent visits to the nest holes towards the end

of the month, and both access and a viewpoint organised, news went public late on 30th. Here's hoping for a similarly successful outcome to that on the Isle of Wight last summer.

After this year's invasion (see last month, page 18), a breeding attempt was no real surprise and the icing on the cake of another productive month for the species. A flock of 10 spent several days in the Theberton and Leiston area of Suffolk from 5th, but the birds don't seem to have followed suit by

settling down to breed. Other peak counts included four on Islay on 1st and threes over Sandwich Bay, Kent, on 10th and Hope Point, Kent, on 31st, in addition to a wide range of ones and twos reported as far north as Orkney.

At least 13 Great and three Cory's Shearwaters passed Porthgwarra, Cornwall, on 13th, hinting at early promise for the seawatching season, but



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

The showy Red-footed Falcon (top) at Chatterley Whitfield, Staffordshire, even attracted the attentions of local police (above), though only out of curiosity.



PAUL AND ANDREA KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDIMAGES.COM)

This adult White-rumped Sandpiper at the American wader hot-spot of Tacumshin, Co Wexford, on 19th was one of five equally distributed between Britain and Ireland during the month.



Eight Temminck's Stints were logged during July, a fairly high count for what is generally thought of as a late spring species; this bird was one of two at Oare Marshes KWT, Kent, which were present from 19-21st.



In many ways looking too exotic to be feeding by an urban roadside, the adult Rose-coloured Starling (centre) at Aberavon, Glamorgan, made a fine show of itself on the very last day of the month with its dowdier native cousins.

JEFF LACK

numbers subsequently failed to improve. A light scattering of both large shearwater species in the South-West and off southern Ireland did include a minimum of 20 Cory's off Scilly on 21st, but no other significant counts were made, despite reasonable seawatching conditions.

Ex-pat Yank ducks

The summering female American Wigeon remained at Rigifa Pool, Aberdeens, into the second half of July, while a drake spent five days at Old Moor RSPB, South Yorks, from 4th before relocating to North Cave Wetlands on 9th. The only Green-winged Teal report came from Caerlaverock, Dumfries and Galloway, on 10th, while the drake Lesser Scaup present at Blagdon Lake, Somerset, from 4th to the

month's end must surely be the Glamorgan bird relocating. Up to two drake Surf Scoters were at Lunan Bay, Angus, mid-month, with just a single male off the Aberdeenshire coast, and a further drake in the South of Gigha, Argyll, from 10-13th.

Up to two Night Herons were seen sporadically at Ham Wall RSPB, Somerset, to 23rd, with double-figure numbers of Great Egrets also in the area and the Purple Heron still there on 4th. Another of this last species was found at King's Fleet, Suffolk, on 14th and lingered there to the end of the month despite going missing for extended periods of time. Cley, Norfolk, also presented a brief Purple Heron on 22nd. The only Glossy Ibis report in July concerned the long-staying bird in Co Waterford,

which was seen again at Clohernagh on 3rd.

After being found on 4th, a White-rumped Sandpiper spent the month in the Spurn and Beacon Ponds area of East Yorkshire, but did go missing for several days at a time. Another was at Hatfield Moors, South Yorks, on 15th, with further adults at Tacumshin, Co Wexford, from 19-21st, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, from 20-24th and Belfast Lough, Co Antrim, from 27-29th.

A good month for Pectoral Sandpipers saw around 20 recorded after the first at Low Newton-by-the-Sea, Northumbs, on 9th. Reports were spread widely across Britain and Ireland, with inland birds at Fowlmere, Cambs, on 20th, Startop's End Res, Herts, on 25th, and Idle Valley, Notts, on 28th; an adult

near Stewarton, Argyll, from 19th was joined by a second bird on 27th. It seems normal for 'Pecs' to outnumber Temminck's Stints these days, with the latter totalling 10 in July, including a peak count of two at Oare Marshes mid-month.

A summer-plumaged American Golden Plover on Castle Down, Tresco, Scilly, on 3rd must have looked resplendent; another breeding-plumaged 'lesser golden plover', almost certainly an American, spent all of a few minutes at Paxton Pits, Cambs, on 27th. Seven Red-necked Phalaropes seen in July included two together off Rocky Point, Co Donegal, on 18th, with birds in Suffolk and Somerset on 31st.

After several years without a record, Titchwell RSPB hosted its second Spotted Crake in as many summers, with an adult seen on a few dates between 12th and 21st. In addition to a few singing males reported, another showed briefly on a few occasions at Brandon Marsh, Warks, on 30th.

Right on cue, an adult Ring-billed Gull returned to Nimmo's Pier, Co Galway, on 17th. Further long-stayers remained in Cornwall and Co Kerry, while a second-calendar-year bird was discovered at Loch Gilp on 22nd, with Argyll's first Caspian Gull also again there that day; the latter was the individual first noted in March. Another significant Caspian Gull record concerned the return of the yellow-ringed bird to Amble harbour, Northumbs, on 26th. The annual post-breeding flush of Yellow-legged Gulls became



Kentish Plover has declined to the point of almost being a true rarity once more in Britain. This juvenile bird at Overcombe near Weymouth, Dorset, on 3 August was the first in the country since early June, and only eight individuals of this former breeding species have been observed this year. Their almost even spread across the southern and eastern quadrants can be easily ascertained from this BirdGuides.com map, and gives an indication that birds may originate from populations on the near Continent and to the south.



increasingly obvious as July wore on, with an amazing count of at least 92 at Stanwick GP, Northants, on 21st.

A White-winged Black Tern at Middleton Lakes, Warks, on 3rd could well have been the bird at Leighton Moss, Lancs, on 4-5th, while another unusually lingered for more than a day at Frampton Marsh RSPB, Lincs, showing well there from 5-7th. A further individual was then tracked from Dungeness, Kent, on 18th to Stanwick Pits, Northants, early the following morning, before it ended up at Rutland Water that afternoon.

Reliable raptors

One of July's true highlights was a confiding and justifiably popular immature male Red-footed Falcon near Chatterley Whitfield, Staffs, from 9th until the month's end, the first twitchable county record for 42 years. Positive news from Blacktoft Sands, East Yorks, concerned the fledging of two juvenile Montagu's Harriers from the nest on the reserve. Several Black Kite records came primarily from Suffolk; presumably a single lingering bird accounted for records from Bawdsey on 21st and 29-31st.

Given that it appears to have been lost as a British breeding species in the past few years, any Golden Oriole report is all the more noteworthy, and an immature male singing at Carlton Miniott, North Yorks, from 20-23rd was the first twitchable individual in the country this year. Another was reported on

the Outer Hebrides on 1st, while a male was a brief visitor to Titchwell, Norfolk, on 29th.

A Red-rumped Swallow spent at least two weeks scouring the skies above Lerwick, Shetland, following its discovery on 2nd, and was the only individual of its kind seen during July. Alpine Swift records involved fly-overs at Beachy Head, East Sussex, on 1st and Spurn, East Yorks, on 8th.

July is never prime time for scarce passerines, but the singing Melodious Warbler in the West Midlands lingered until 11th, bringing it to exactly a month in residence. Another was on Blakeney Point, Norfolk, on 31st, while an Icterine Warbler on Fair Isle on 21st followed records of both Common Rosefinch and Marsh Warbler. Another Marsh Warbler was singing at Carlton Marshes, Suffolk, on 3rd, while a Common Rosefinch sang at Portland Bill, Dorset, on 7th.

A scattering of Red-backed Shrikes included records from Orkney on 4th and Devon on 9th, followed by a female at Churn, Oxon, from 25th and males at Beaulieu, Hants, from 25-29th and Isle of May, Fife, on 28-29th.

An adult Rose-coloured Starling occupied feeders in a garden at South Dell, Lewis, for much of the second half of July, while another showy adult was found at Aberavon, Glamorgan, on the final day of the month. A third bird was on Fair Isle late on. ■



LYNNE LAMBERT

A 'Reed Warbler' trapped at a Constant Effort Site in a wooded area of Marsworth Reservoir, Tring, Hertfordshire, on 2 August caused a local kerfuffle when it was quickly reidentified from its biometrics and moult condition as an adult Marsh Warbler. Despite its worn plumage, a trace of the 'classic' identification feature of pale tips to the primaries can be seen in the photograph. Perhaps more intriguingly, the bird turned out to have been ringed in France and was clearly heading in entirely the wrong direction to get to its African wintering quarters. After detailed notes had been taken, the bird was released at 6.30 am and promptly disappeared. The species seems to be becoming gradually thinner on the ground every year, though still breeds very sporadically in more southern parts of England. There were 19 reports in June, but only one in either month since.

BIRGUIDES

It's not often that the pelagic Sabine's Gull can be seen loafing on an urban lake among Mallards, but such an opportunity arose when an adult was found at Pennington Flash, Gtr Manchester, on 4 August. The bird remained present and popular as we went to press.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

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Western Palearctic: July 2015

The falcon has landed

Josh Jones reports on a month where a mega eastern raptor reached the Faroes, while the Holy Land scored several national rarities.

An Amur Falcon photographed by a householder on her front porch in Tórshavn on the Faroe Islands on 24 July was later identified from the images, including this astonishingly close shot.

SELMA MCINTOSH



Israel's fantastic summer continued into July with the first record of Senegal Thick-knee for the country; it was discovered at Ma'agan Michael on 8th. Surprisingly for this largely sedentary species, it proved a one-day wonder and was not seen again by the end of the month.

This was closely followed by the country's first Pink-backed Pelican since 2000, which was initially found and identified as a Great White Pelican on 9th;

video footage of the bird posted on YouTube was discovered several days later, and the true identification clinched. Unlike the thick-knee, the pelican, found near Ein Har'od, was thankfully still present when looked for on 20th and lingered to the end of July. With the young Bateleur still at Gal'on until at least 11th, it was a fine month for rarities in the nation.

An extraordinary occurrence was Germany's first Bulwer's Petrel found well inland at

Ellwangen, Baden-Württemberg, on 23rd. The bird was in appalling condition and unsurprisingly died not long after its discovery. Quite how (and by which route) it managed to arrive in southern Germany remains a mystery, but just goes to show that anything really can turn up anywhere.

The Black-browed Albatross visited Heligoland on 7th and 26th, but seemed to be spending most of its time in Danish waters, with sightings at Ribe on

8th, Esbjerg on 16th, Henne on 23rd and Hestholm and Agger on 31st, as well as its visit to Suffolk on 12th (see page 12).

Germany also boasted its second Bimaculated Lark, at Beltringharder Koog, Schleswig-Holstein, on 31st, as well as two different Greater Sand Plovers, with records from Schleswig-Holstein and well inland in Niedersachsen. Lithuania's second Dalmatian Pelican was at the Nemunas Delta on 3rd, while an Ivory Gull flying south



Above: a whale-watching trip off Reykjavik, Iceland, on 1 July yielded a 'photobombing' Yellow-nosed Albatross for one lucky tourist. **Right:** surprisingly, considering they breed in the next-door country of Egypt, this Senegal Thick-Knee on 8th at Ma'agan Michael was a first for Israel and the first to be found anywhere outside its breeding range in the entire region.

JARED MEIN



OZ HORINE

TOR A OLSEN



A first-summer Pacific Diver at Farsund, Vest-Agder, Norway, on 12th (left) posed helpfully with adult summer Black-throated Divers (right), enabling their structural differences to be easily compared.

EZRA HADAD



The popular Bateleur that was found at Gal'on on the Judean plains of Israel on 31 May was seen intermittently until 11 July.



Late June's Oriental Cuckoo at Sotkamo, Finland, remained into July, being last seen there on 3rd.



RONI VÄISÄNEN

at Harboøre Tange, Denmark, on 10th was an unseasonal occurrence.

In Finland the Oriental Cuckoo was last noted at Sotkamo on 3rd, while a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater flew over Pori on 11th. Neighbouring Norway had a

prolific month with its first Pacific Diver found off Farsund, Vest-Agder from 12-14th, and a

Franklin's Gull in the area on 10th. Two Stejneger's Scoters were seen in July, with a female off Nesseby, Finnmark, from

7-15th at least and a drake in the bay at Fauske, Nordland, from 15-21st. A Pied-billed Grebe was in the country at Leknes from 23rd.

Big news from Iceland concerned a remarkable 'photobomb', when a Yellow-nosed Albatross was caught in an image of a surfacing

Humpback Whale from a whale-watching boat off Reykjavík on 1st. Also in Iceland, what was presumably the returning drake Hooded Merganser was at Áltanes, near Reykjavík, from 29th.

Italy's first White-rumped Swift was at Capo Murro di Porco, Sicily, on 21st, while in Spain an immature Brown Booby was seen flying past Cabo Roche, Cádiz, on 5th. It completed a remarkable hat-trick of WP boobies in close succession, following an adult Masked Booby past Lajes do Pico, Azores, on 4th and belated news of an immature Red-footed Booby at sea off Faial, also Azores, in mid-June.

In Portugal the Pied Crow found at Cabo Espichel, Setúbal, lingered there to at least 11th, while a second-calendar-year Steppe Eagle near Vila Franca de Xira, Lisbon, from 8-12th was an impressive record so far west. ■



Another addition to Israel's 'purple patch' was a juvenile Pink-backed Pelican among the migrating White Pelicans in the Herod Valley; it was the eighth record for the country.



OZ HORINE

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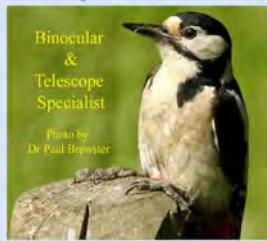


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10x42 £339.95



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Conquest HD from £599

Where to watch birds



- 1** Frampton Marsh, Lincolnshire.
Pages 25-27
- 2** Hayle Estuary, Cornwall.
Page 28
- 3** Pagham Harbour, West Sussex.
Page 29
- 4** Wallasea Island, Essex.
Page 30
- 5** Point of Ayr, Flintshire.
Page 31
- 6** Loch of Strathbeg, Aberdeenshire.
Page 32

MORE SEPTEMBER SITES

- Achill Island, Co Mayo:
bit.ly/bw243AchillIsland
- Burnham Overy, Norfolk:
bit.ly/bw255BurnhamOvery
- Druridge Bay, Northumberland:
bit.ly/bw231DruridgeBay
- Formby Point to Birkdale, Lancashire:
bit.ly/bw255FormbyPointBirkdale
- Hayling Island, Hampshire:
bit.ly/bw255HaylingIsland
- Rame Head, Cornwall:
bit.ly/bw231RameHead
- Sandwich Bay, Kent:
bit.ly/bw231SandwichBay
- St Abb's Head, Berwickshire:
bit.ly/bw243StAbbs
- Stodmarsh and Grove Ferry, Kent:
bit.ly/bw243StodmarshGroveFerry
- Tacumshin, Co Wexford:
bit.ly/bw243Tacumshin



1 SITE OF THE MONTH FRAMPTON MARSH

This coastal wetland reserve includes a range of habitats that attract a great variety of waders. September is an excellent time to visit as the high tides force thousands of waders to seek refuge from the water on the highest parts of the marsh, says **Chris Andrews**.



Black-tailed Godwit is something of a feature at Frampton Marsh in September, with thousands of birds gathering on the scrape.

Situated on the Lincolnshire shore of The Wash, Frampton Marsh is a real wader hot-spot. Autumn migration is a particularly good time to visit, both for the number and variety of commoner species and the impressive record of rarities. In recent years, highlights have included Oriental and Collared Pratincoles, Broad-billed Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher, as well as Black-eared Wheatear and Buff-bellied Pipit. The site also hosted

Britain's first nesting attempt by Glossy Ibis. Not bad for a reserve that only opened six years ago! Frampton is a mixture of saltmarsh and freshwater habitats, with wet grassland, scrapes and a burgeoning reedbed.

Rarity hot-spot

One of the great features of Frampton Marsh is that through dynamic management passage and rarer waders can turn up almost anywhere. The

USEFUL CONTACTS

Travel information and timetables

- Traveline: 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline.info.
- Traveline Scotland: 0871 200 2233 or www.travelinescotland.com.
- Traveline Cymru: 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline-cymru.info

Stagecoach Bus:

- www.stagecoachbus.com.
- Arriva Bus: 0844 800 4411 or www.arrivabus.co.uk.
- National Rail: 0845 748 4950 or www.nationalrail.com.
- Sustrans: 0117 926 8893 or www.sustrans.org.uk.

National bird news

BirdGuides.com: for all bird news and to report your own sightings, call 0333 577 2473, email sightings@birdguides.com or visit www.birdguides.com.

Mapping

Access fully interactive and annotated Google maps for all

itineraries at bit.ly/BWMaps.

Further information

- County bird recorders: www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders.
- Birdwatch Bookshop: for discounted birding books see www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.

WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS

A small reservoir at the southern edge of the reserve is good for freshwater waders such as Green Sandpiper (main photo). Check the feeders at the visitor centre for the declining Tree Sparrow (inset).

DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)



following is therefore a suggested route that covers the majority of the reserve. Almost anywhere along this route you might find **Knot**, **Little** and possibly **Temminck's Stints**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Ruff**, **Dunlin** and many more waders. A rising high tide is always the best time to visit, as birds are pushed off The Wash and seek refuge on the reserve.

From the car park (TF 358390), cross the road to the visitor centre ① where the reserve sightings board is kept up to date by RSPB staff and volunteers. The feeders here often attract **Tree Sparrows**.

Going south-east from the centre along the path, after 250 m you will come to a turning on the left, through a gate. Before heading that way, climb onto the small mound to scan in all directions. From this point you can see reedbed, wet grassland and the southernmost of the three scrapes. **Water Rail** can be seen in the reedy pond under the mound.

Passing through the gate, another 350 m will take you to two of the three hides. The 360 Hide ② is in the middle of the scrapes, and often surrounded by birds. With the tide in, this hide can overlook hordes of waders, and is a particularly good spot to see **Black-tailed Godwits**, which can number in their thousands. On the other side

of the path is the Reedbed Hide ③, overlooking the reedbed and particularly the area where gulls come to roost. **Mediterranean Gulls** have been regularly seen here.

Continuing along the path, and turning right at the T-junction, another 900 m will take you to East Hide ④ (TF 366391). From here you can view the northernmost scrape and also part of the wet grassland. Retracing your steps for a few yards, you can climb some steps onto the seawall for the first view over the saltmarsh.

Left or right?

At this point you have a choice. By turning left then right, you can follow

the course of the river down to its mouth (TF 397392) ⑤, a walk of 2 miles. The river bank is lined with small bushes which, in appropriate conditions, provide shelter for migrating passerines. In recent years **Wryneck** and **Barred Warbler** have been found there. The river mouth itself affords views over mudflats for more waders. **Sandwich** and **Little Terns** may be found fishing at the mouth, and seabirds are always a possibility on a rising tide.

If this extra walk is not desired, turning right along the sea bank takes you between the saltmarsh and the freshwater portion of the reserve. The sea bank is an ideal vantage point to look down onto the wet grassland



HAN BOUWMEESTER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



The largest of Britain's *Circus* species, Marsh Harrier can be seen hunting over the saltmarsh.

underneath, allowing views into the pools and channels that otherwise might hide something interesting.

A ramp and second set of steps allow access to the sea bank after half a mile (TF 365383). By descending here you can return along the road to the car park and visitor centre. Alternatively you may continue along the sea bank ⑥. The saltmarsh may hold Northern Wheatear, early Brent Geese and European Golden and Grey Plovers. There is a vantage point at

TF 362378 which is a particularly good place to look for Marsh (and later in the year Hen) Harriers and Short-eared Owls.

Raptor watch

A few metres further on, steps descend to an old sea bank which forms the southern edge of the reserve. Again, this is a great vantage point to look down into the wet grassland for waders. It is also worth scanning the fencelines for raptors such as Peregrine Falcon,

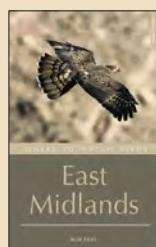
Hobby and Merlin.

After three quarters of a mile, turn right (TF 350384) and walk along a public footpath past a small reservoir ⑦. This is a great place for sandpipers, particularly Green and Common. Following the footpath, a bench at TF 355389 is a good place to again check for waders in the wet areas of the grassland. The footpath emerges onto the reserve's access road at TF 356392 after about three quarters of a mile, and a short walk will return you to the car park. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in the East Midlands by Rob Fray (Christopher Helm, second edition, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

Sites and access

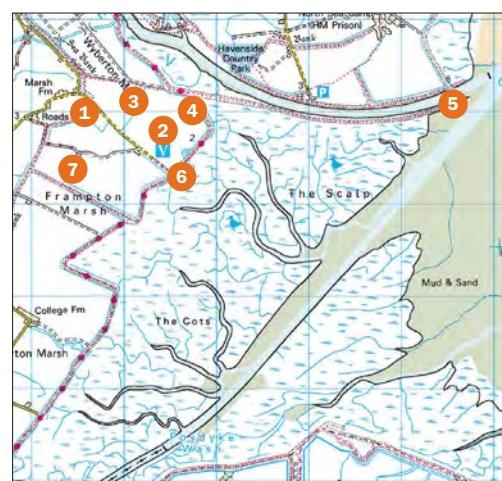
The site is open 24 hours a day, with the visitor centre open 10 am–4 pm (5 pm on weekends and bank holidays between April and September). There are no entry charges, though non-RSPB members are asked for a donation to park their car. The nearest train station is at Boston. A bus service runs to nearby Kirton; call Brylaine on 01205 364087 or visit www.brylaine.co.uk. Sustrans National Cycle Route 1 runs close to the reserve. The route outlined is unsuitable for those in wheelchairs, but all three hides, the visitor centre and toilets are accessible.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 249 and Landranger 131.

Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/framptonmarsh for more details on the reserve and weekly sightings blog.
- www.lincsbirdclub.co.uk for local sightings.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPBintheEast, @RSPBNorfolkLinc and @Lincsbirding.



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2 HAYLE ESTUARY

By Roberta Smith

Where and why

Hayle Estuary RSPB in Cornwall is the most south-westerly estuary in Britain. It is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest due to its hot-spot status for wintering waders and migrant birds. During autumn, the estuary hosts a variety of waders passing through en route to their winter quarters. This fragmented estuarine reserve is mainly urban.

Route planner

Start at the RSPB hide at Ryan's Field, accessed from the B3301. If travelling in a westerly direction from Hayle, fork off left on the minor road signposted to St Erth; the reserve entrance is about 200 m along this road on the right just before the first railway bridge – look for the brown signs reading 'Hayle Estuary nature reserve'. Car parking at the hide is free.

Ryan's Field 1 is a high-tide roost. Scan the waterways and islands for waders such as **Eurasian Curlew**, **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Common Redshank**, **Oystercatcher**, **Common Snipe**, **Greenshank** and **Bar-tailed** and **Black-tailed Godwits**. You may also see **Ruff**. Look along the islands for **Dunlin** and **Sanderling**. There are usually good views of **Kingfisher** at the hide.

Leaving the hide, take the right-hand path to follow the footpath to the causeway. Watch for **Little Egret**, **Grey Heron** and Kingfisher. On reaching the causeway and Lelant Water 2, you can enjoy good views of **Eurasian Teal** and **Eurasian Wigeon**. American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and

Curlew Sandpiper have been recorded. **Black**, **Arctic** and **Common Terns** may be seen feeding. **Peregrine Falcon** is often seen here. **Northern Lapwing** frequents the Lelant roost at Ryan's Field.

Now start a leisurely walk towards Hayle, keeping an eye on the waterways on both sides. Lelant Water on the left may hold **European Golden Plover**, as well as the occasional **Green Sandpiper** and **Grey Plover**. Ryan's Field on the right may now provide better views of waders not seen from the hide. Keep an eye out for **Ruff**, as this is where they are most likely to be found.

Continue towards Hayle to Carnsew Pool (approximately 20-30 minutes) 3, crossing busy roads with care. At the grey Tempest building, turn right down the path. Once you're past some shrubs, the RSPB sign will be seen.

Walk clockwise, and with the main estuary on your left, look for Common Redshank and Greenshank. Carnsew Pool on your right should have good numbers of Eurasian Curlew and Eurasian Whimbrel, as well as smaller counts of Dunlin and Sanderling. Scan for Grey and **Ringed Plovers**. **European Stonechat** may be seen on the vegetated fringes.

During low tide, waders and diving ducks will be feeding on the main part of the estuary. Keep a look out for **Black-throated** and **Great Northern Divers** and Slavonian and **Little Grebes**. **Long-tailed Duck** may be seen.

If your car is parked at the



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

Ryan's Field offers refuge for a variety of waders at high tide. Look out for Greenshank among the different species.

hide car park, retrace your steps and then drive into Hayle to the swimming pool car park at Copperhouse Pool 4.

Walk clockwise along the grass path beside the pool; all the estuary birds already mentioned should be seen, along with **Knot**. There are two viewpoints at either end of Copperhouse Pool. As a rare or noteworthy bird may be obscured by deep channels, it is worth driving to the other side of

the pool and parking in the pay-and-display car park 5 near the Information Centre (or finding the free Commercial Road car park).

Spotted Redshank has been seen. At the onset of winter there could be 300 Eurasian Teal and Eurasian Wigeon at Copperhouse Pool and on the main estuary. There should also be a good variety of gulls present, including **Mediterranean** and possibly **Little Gulls**.



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Devon and Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly
DAVID NORMAN AND VIC TUCKER

Where to Watch Birds in Devon and Cornwall by David Norman and Vic Tucker (fifth edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

► Sites and access

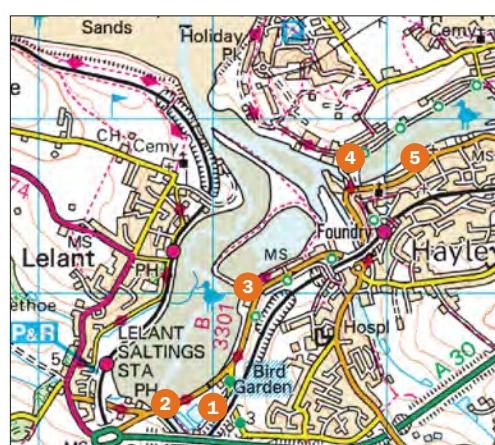
The reserve is open at all times and entry is free. Most car parking is free, but some is pay and display. There are train stations at Hayle and St Erth. First Group runs regular bus services from St Erth train station, Penzance and Truro; call 01872 305950 or visit www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/devon_cornwall/. The reserve is on Sustrans National Cycle Route 3. The route is a mix of pathways including level, surfaced footpaths in some areas.

► Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 102 and Landranger 203.

► Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/hayleestuary for details on the reserve.
- www.cbwp.org.uk/cbwpsword/sightings/ for local bird news and sightings.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPBSouthWest.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

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3

PAGHAM HARBOUR

By Roy Newnham

Where and why

Pagham Harbour commands a rich mix of habitats – sea, shingle beach, saltmarsh, mudflats, pasture, arable, saline lagoons, reedy ditches, scrub and hedgerows – managed for a huge range of wildlife. The reserve is attractive to a wide range of waterbirds and passerines, and the following route focuses on its passage, wintering and resident birds.

Route planner

Pagham Harbour RSPB is situated 5 miles south of Chichester on the West Sussex coastline. Taking the B2145 from Chichester to Selsey, the visitor centre is 200 m south of Sidlesham on the left-hand side with parking and toilets (SZ 857966).

After asking in the visitor centre to see what's around and to check the tide times, head south. Scan the hedgerows and trees around the discovery area for passage warblers as you head 400 m towards the hide at Ferry Pool ① (SZ 857964). Look from the hide across the road for sandpipers; **Common** and **Green** are regular, with a good chance of **Wood** and **Curlew Sandpipers**. **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Ruff**, **Little Stint** and other passage waders are all possible, and **Pectoral Sandpiper** has occurred.

Ferry Pool has an enviable track record for turning up nationally rare waders, from Least Sandpiper to Wilson's Phalarope. Views are best in the morning before the sun swings around, and at high tide.

Continuing along the path,

A scarce but regular autumn migrant to eastern and southern coasts of Britain, Wryneck can be seen in the area known as the Severals.



STEVE ARLON WWW.BIRDERSPLAYGROUND.CO.UK

cross Ferry Channel, with big pipes going down into it; this is a favourite spot for **Spotted Redshank**. Follow the path round onto the West Side and Long Pool ② (SZ 859964) on your

left, keeping an eye out for **Reed**, **Sedge** and **Cetti's Warblers** and sometimes **Bearded Tits** among the reeds. To your right, **Red-legged Partridge**, **Meadow Pipit** and **Skylark** can usually be seen

in the fields.

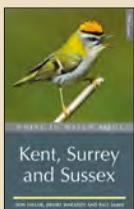
After 400 m, at the end of Long Pool, the view opens out across the western side of the harbour, revealing **Grey Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Eurasian Curlew** and other returning waders feeding at low tide. At high tide keep an eye out for the first wintering **Avocets** roosting, along with **Eurasian Wigeon** and **Northern Pintail**.

Staying on the path, head south for another 800 m until you reach the hide at Church Norton ③ (SZ 871958), making sure you check Glebe Meadow behind the hide for **Common Redstart**, **Spotted** and **Pied Flycatchers** and other passage passerines. Scan across the mudflats for passage **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **Knot**, **Dunlin**, **Bar-tailed Godwits** and other early winter waders. Views can be close on a rising tide.

If the birds increase in numbers, check the skies for **Peregrine Falcon** or passage raptors such as **Osprey**. Towards the end of September and into early October, the first returning **Brent Geese** will be appearing.

Pick up the path again, heading around the harbour edge to the shingle beach and sea, checking the Severals ④ (SZ 874949) for **Wryneck**, or **Hobbies** hunting dragonflies. Along the coastline look for **Turnstone** and **Sanderling**, while scanning the sea for **Slavonian Grebe** and winter divers.

From here retrace your steps to the visitor centre car park, taking in the birds moving with the tidal interchanges en route. ■

**VISITOR INFORMATION****READS**

- **Where to Watch Birds in Kent, Surrey and Sussex** by Don Taylor, Paul James and Jeffery Wheatley (fifth edition, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.
- **The Sussex Bird Report** No 66 2013 (Sussex Ornithological Society, £11, www.sos.org.uk).

Sites and access

The reserve is open all hours, all year round; the visitor centre is open daily 10 am-4 pm. Entry is free, including parking. The nearest train station is Chichester and the Stagecoach Bus 51 Link service from the bus station stops right outside the visitor centre. The reserve is on Sustrans National Cycle Route 88. The route is mainly unimproved footpaths, making it unsuitable for wheelchairs.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer OL8 and Landranger 197.

Web resources

- www.selseybirder.blogspot.co.uk for news and sightings.
- www.sos.org.uk for the Sussex Ornithological Society.
- www.rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour for more information about the reserve.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPB_SouthEast and @SussexOrnitholo.



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See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps



4

WALLASEA ISLAND

By Rachel Fancy

Where and why

Wallasea Island Wild Coast project is situated on the south bank of the River Crouch, opposite Burnham-on-Crouch and 5 miles north-east of Rochford. The flat landscape provides superb panoramic views across the river, saltmarsh, lagoons and grassland. Along with the vast sky-scape, the route provides a great place to go for an early autumn wildlife walk, searching for raptors and wetland birds always with the chance of a scarcity.

The reserve is being remodelled using spoil from Crossrail, a new rail route under London. Soil from tunnelling and station construction from this major engineering project will be transported by sea to Wallasea Island (see *Birdwatch* 277: 64-66).

Route planner

Wallasea Island can be reached by following the Ashingdon Road north from Rochford, turning right onto Brays Lane and following the brown signs to the reserve. At the end of the public road, travel another mile or so along the track to reach the visitor car park 1 (TQ 954945).

Leave the car park by climbing the ramp onto the seawall and look out north over Allfleets Marsh 2. This area has been saltmarsh and mudflats for more than nine years, so large numbers of waders and wildfowl can now be seen feeding just before and after high tide. Look out for **Grey** and **Ringed Plovers** and **Black-tailed Godwit** on the higher sections of mud, while **Eurasian Teal** and **Eurasian Wigeon** can often be seen in the lower creeks.

Walk east along the footpath for about 2 miles, looking for wetland birds to the north all the way to a viewpoint at the easternmost corner of the island. About half a mile along the path, lagoons lie to the south 3. These hold flocks of wading birds, including large numbers of **European Golden Plover**, **Northern Lapwing**, Eurasian Wigeon and a mix of gulls.

Having crossed the footbridge on the right, continue a further half mile along the path. A new area of intertidal habitat, Jubilee Marsh, stretches out before you 4. Created this summer, it remains to be seen where the birds will gather, but expect large numbers of waders, ducks and geese roosting on the islands and feeding in the mud.

On the return walk, look

south over the grasslands 5 where, through autumn and winter, raptors and owls hunt.

Marsh and **Hen Harriers** patrol the grasslands searching for voles and other prey and last winter a Rough-legged Buzzard was regularly seen. **Short-eared Owl** and **Kestrel** also hunt the seawalls, saltmarsh and grassland, while a **Peregrine Falcon** may appear. As the light starts to fade, **Barn Owls** will begin hunting, too.

Passerines can be seen in numbers across the grassland, with flocks of several hundred **Corn Buntings** enjoying the large amounts of natural seed, along with regular flocks of **Linnet** and **Reed Bunting** 6. **Skylark** and **Meadow Pipit** are seen across the site. ■

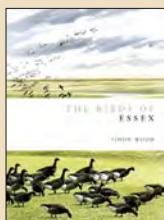


WIL LEURS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



The Birds of Essex
by Simon Wood
(Christopher Helm, £40) – order from £34.99 on page 77.

► Sites and access

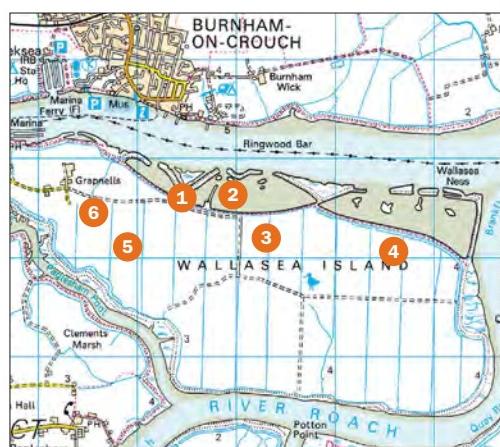
The reserve is open until 7 pm or dusk every day. The car park is free. Currently, the route is mainly on the grass seawall which can get muddy in the winter. The nearest train station is at Rochford. Stephensons of Essex runs a bus service from Rochford to nearby Canewdon; call 01702 541511 or visit www.stephensonsofessex.com. A ferry runs from Burnham-on-Crouch to Wallasea Marina, about 1 mile west of the reserve along the seawall; call 07704 060482 or visit www.burnhamferry.co.uk.

► Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 176 and Landranger 178.

► Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/wallaseaisland for details of the Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project.
- www.southendrspb.co.uk for regularly updated local sightings.
- www.sognet.org.uk for Southend Ornithological Group.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPB_Essex.



See bit.ly/BWMMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

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5

POINT OF AYR RSPB

By Daniel Trotman

Where and why

The Point of Ayr lies on the north Flintshire coastline, marking the outer tip of the Dee Estuary on the Welsh shore. A mixture of mudflats, saltmarsh, sand dune and shingle spit have been managed by the RSPB as part of its Dee Estuary nature reserve since 1983.

Habitats include scrub and freshwater pools, but the site is most renowned for its high tide wader roost. A visit on a high tide in autumn will promise vast flocks of **Oystercatcher**, Dunlin, **Knot** and both godwits returning to winter on the estuary, along with the chance of **Greenshank**, **Spotted Redshank** and **Eurasian Whimbrel**, as well as the occasional **Curlew Sandpiper** and **Little Stint** on passage. Historical rarities include White-rumped, Pectoral, Marsh and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, plus Kentish and American Golden Plovers.

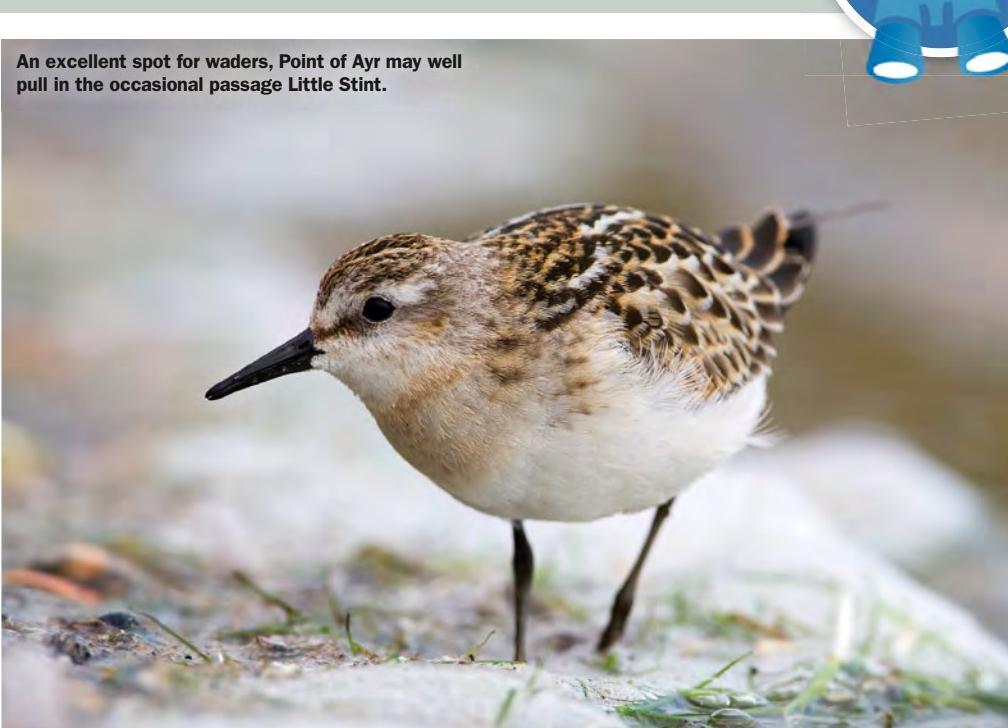
Route planner

Access to the Point of Ayr is easiest via the town of Talacre, off the A548 coast road between Prestatyn and Flint. Park up in one of the public car parks off Station Road and head on foot towards the beach to the top of the seawall ①.

From here, much of the site is clearly visible – the iconic disused lighthouse is to the left, straight ahead are the sand dunes and beach beyond, and panning right you'll see the saltmarsh. Take a brief walk across the beach car park and through the dunes onto the beach ②, which is a great spot for autumn seawatching

An excellent spot for waders, Point of Ayr may well pull in the occasional passage Little Stint.

WIL LEURS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



on a rising tide. Previous sightings have included **Leach's Storm-petrel**, **Sabine's Gull** and **Long-tailed Skua**. Return to the seawall and then turn right to follow the public footpath south-east along the seawall.

As you walk, scan the saltmarsh creeks for flocks of **Common Redshank** flushed by the rising tide. In the distance, you'll see strings of small waders drifting in from around the estuary, gradually forming large flocks which flush occasionally as the tide pushes them higher up the beach onto the shingle spit.

Get comfortable in the hide ③, and wait for the show to unfold. Oystercatchers form a dark

smear along the spit, while hundreds of **Eurasian Curlew** start to gather on the saltmarsh in front of the hide, joined by a mix of **Black-tailed** and **Bar-tailed Godwits**. A keen eye may well find a Greenshank, Spotted Redshank or Eurasian Whimbrel here, or scarcer waders that may happen to settle.

It's hard to pull yourself away even when the tide has peaked. On the highest tides, there may be some late arrivals as birds continue to trickle in having been driven off other nearby roosts; the height of the spit means the point often serves as a last refuge at the mouth of the estuary. The chance of a hunting **Peregrine**

Falcon or **Merlin** would cap the spectacle perfectly.

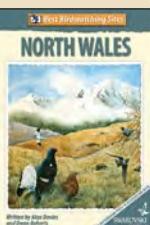
From the hide, head back to the seawall path and, if you have the time, bear left rather than right for the short walk to the Point of Ayr colliery lagoons ④ where **Common** and **Jack Snipe** can be found in the surrounding wetland, if you're lucky.

Retrace your steps along the seawall back to Station Road, or head north-west to Talacre Warren ⑤ for the chance of catching a range of **warblers**, **pipits** and **chats** on migration in the scrub and grassland, often the first landfall for birds crossing the sea from north-west England. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Best Birdwatching Sites in North Wales by Alan Davies and Owen Roberts (Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.

► Sites and access

Entry to the site is free, although parking charges apply in some of the public car parks. The nearest train station is at Prestatyn, and Arriva runs a number of services between Prestatyn, Holywell and Talacre. Sustrans National Cycle Route 8 is close to the reserve. The beach is not fully accessible, although a boardwalk extends north from point ① to a wooden platform in the dunes which offers sea views. The seawall path to the hide was recently improved and is now fully accessible.

► Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 265 and Landranger 116.

► Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/pointofayr for more information on the reserve
- www.deestuary.co.uk for recent sightings and news.



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See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

6

LOCH OF STRATHBEG RSPB

By Kath Hamper



Pink-footed Geese winter in their thousands at Loch of Strathbeg, with birds starting to arrive in September, providing spectacular sights as they leave the reserve at dawn.



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

Where and why

Situated on the coast of north-east Scotland, between Peterhead and Fraserburgh, Loch of Strathbeg RSPB is Britain's largest dune loch. A combination of fresh water, sand dunes, reedbeds, farmland and wetland provide habitats for a wide variety of wildlife. Autumn sees the arrival of wintering geese, ducks and waders, flocks of farmland birds and hunting raptors. Previous years have brought Greater Yellowlegs, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Great Egret, Sandhill Crane, regular Pectoral Sandpipers and Little Stints, as

well as long-staying Little Egret, Bearded Tit and the occasional White-tailed Eagle.

Route planner

The reserve is signposted from the A90 in Crimond village; take the turn by the kirk, following the brown tourist signs. At the T-junction at the end of the road, turn left; the reserve entrance is approximately 500 m on the right.

Follow the track to the car park and visitor centre 1 (NK 056580). Around the car park, check the bushes and feeders for **Tree Sparrow** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. From the

centre, there are views across the wetlands; look for **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Little Stint** and **Pectoral Sandpiper** on the flooded areas, as well as a wide variety of wintering wildfowl. **Common Redshank**, **Greenshank** and the occasional **Spotted Redshank**, as well as flocks of **Eurasian Curlew**, **Northern Lapwing** and **European Golden Plover**, may be seen from here.

Follow the signs from the car park to Tower Pool Hide, checking the trees for small passerines. Take the track across the fields – watch out for flocks of farmland birds such as **Yellowhammer**,

Reed and Corn Buntings and finches in the gorse 2 (NK 052581).

From Tower Pool Hide 3 (NK 051584) there are closer views of the flooded fields. This is a great place to pick out **Little Egrets** or to watch the wintering **Whooper Swans** and **Pink-footed Geese** as they leave the reserve in spectacular numbers at dawn to feed in the surrounding fields. You may also see a hunting **Peregrine Falcon**.

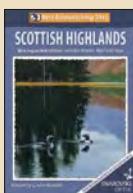
The rest of the reserve is only accessible by car. For the loch-side hides, return to Crimond, turn left and take the road on the left signposted Crimond Airfield. Then follow the brown RSPB signs to the car park (NK 065586). From here it is a 410-m walk to Fen Hide 4 (NK 062587), 160 m of which is along a boardwalk, or a 260 m walk to Bay Hide 5 (NK 065589). Both of these give good views of the wildfowl wintering on the loch, and you may see **Bearded Tits** from the boardwalk.

For the more adventurous, the dunes and beach of Back Bar 6 offer a wild and windswept walk, with a good chance of seeing **Ringed Plover**, **Sanderling**, **sandpipers**, **godwits** and other shorebirds, as well as seabirds and ducks offshore. From the north, park at the Tufted Duck Hotel at St Combs (NK 057628), from where it's a 2-mile walk to the Cut Bridge and Lagoon (NK 068607), where the loch meets the sea. From the south, the lagoon is a 3-mile walk from the Lighthouse Cottages at Rattray (NK 102577). ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



- **Best Birdwatching Sites in the Scottish Highlands** by Gordon Hamlett (Buckingham Press, £18.97) – order from £16.95 on page 77.
- **Birding Guide to North-East Scotland** by Mark Sullivan and Ian Francis (£7.50 plus £2 p+p, available via www.rspb.org.uk/groups/aberdeen).

Sites and access

The visitor centre is open 9 am–5 pm; the hides are open from dawn to dusk. Entry and parking are free. The nearest railway station is some distance away at Aberdeen. There are regular Stagecoach (service 69) buses to Crimond from Peterhead and Fraserburgh. The visitor centre and toilets are wheelchair accessible and there is a stair lift to the viewing area; the walk to Tower Pool Hide is about 820 m on an uneven track.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 427 and Landranger 30.

Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/lochofstrathbeg for more information about the reserve.
- www.the-soc.org.uk/whats-on/local-branches-2/grampian for the local branch of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPB_NEScotland.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

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SEPTEMBER'S TARGET BIRD

Ortolan Bunting



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

The south and south-west coasts of England are the best destinations for Ortolan Bunting (above), as can be seen from the BirdGuides map (right), which show records from last September.

This scarce visitor to Britain has never been common, but it has become rarer in recent years, making it more difficult to find.

In the 70s and 80s, the number of records in Britain increased, reaching an average of about 70 a year in the 90s, helped by a big year in 1996 when almost 120 were recorded. Since then, however, there has been a notable decline, with only 16 logged in 2004 and over the last 10 years an average of about 30 each year. Most are single birds, often flying over, and most notably at Portland, Dorset. Occasionally several individuals are seen together, including four at Portland in September 2013 and seven on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 13 September 1995, but nothing can match the extraordinary 100

birds seen on Bryher, Scilly, on 25 September 1956.

Ortolan is a monotypic species, breeding across much of Europe and into Central Asia, and wintering in sub-Saharan Africa. Western European breeding birds spend the winter in West Africa. Spring records are probably drift migrants heading for Scandinavia, hence the more northerly distribution, while autumn individuals may originate from more southerly populations which breed nearest to Britain. One bird was caught in France six days after being ringed in Sweden, some 1,243 miles away, so it covered an average distance of 205 miles each day.

The decline of western Europe's Ortolan Buntings has been huge, with 82 per cent vanishing between 1980 and 2008. Trapping in south-west France, which



amounted to 50,000 birds annually in the 1990s, has been much publicised, and while this must have had a huge impact on numbers, there may be problems in their wintering areas which also have an effect.

In autumn, most records are from south-west England, with others along the south and east coasts, between mid-August and mid-October. It is almost annual in Wales, with rarely more than a few records each year. Spring records are often in the Northern Isles, with some east coast records, and occur largely in May. Numbers in spring are usually much lower than those in autumn, but exceptionally, in May 1969, more than 100 were seen in Scotland, although such influxes are rare.

How to see

Like many buntings, Ortolans are ground feeders, and this can make them difficult to see. Coastal fields are the best place to look and autumn is usually the prime time. Scan for any feeding seed-eaters then check carefully among them, as migrants will often associate with other species. Ortolans can be shy, and many are first located by the distinctive call given in flight. ■

- For recent reports of Ortolan Bunting in Britain and Ireland, go to www.birdguides.com.

BIRDGUIDES



FIND YOUR OWN

In autumn the south and south-west of England offers the best possibilities, while in spring the Northern Isles seem most productive. The sites below host autumn birds in most years.

England

- **East Yorkshire:** Flamborough Head (TA 254706) and Spurn Point (TA 420148)
- **Norfolk:** Blakeney Point (TG 006461)
- **Suffolk:** Landguard Point (TM 284319)
- **Scilly:** St Mary's (SV 915110)
- **Cornwall:** Porthgwarra (SW 371217)
- **Devon:** Lundy (SS 136447)
- **Dorset:** Portland Bird Observatory (SY 681689)

Wales

- **Gwynedd:** Bardsey Island (SH 118217)

Scotland

- **Shetland:** Fair Isle (HZ 221723)



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MARK AVERY

Politics and nature

A meeting between our most famous TV naturalist and the world's most famous politician got **Mark Avery** wondering about the roles of media and politics in wildlife.

Did you see the conversation between Sir David Attenborough and President Barack Obama that was broadcast on the BBC in June? As they chatted about overpopulation, climate change and loss of wildlife, as well as about their love of wildlife, it made me ponder the roles of the media and politicians in general.

It was Enoch Powell who said: "All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs." This is a somewhat depressing take on the fact that there is always more to do. No politician leaves the world completely sorted and in good order, but some of them try rather harder than others. Liz Truss is the Secretary of State for the Environment, but you could hardly tell. I have not noticed her say anything at all about wildlife in her 13 months in the job. I don't think Ms Truss's tenure at DEFRA will end in failure – she doesn't appear to be trying to achieve anything and so cannot fail.

In theory, this government and this country are committed to global biodiversity goals, which will be assessed in a mere five years' time, but we see no sense of urgency in government attempts to halt the loss of wildlife around us. That commitment certainly will end in failure, unless Ms Truss wakes up and puts a great deal more effort into doing her job properly.

Old news

Nor are the media very interested in the biodiversity crisis either. A few weeks ago, I was told by a very respected and senior journalist that they couldn't make more of the environment unless there were some new stories. My suggestion that slavery was an old story for quite a long time before it was abolished was greeted with a shrug. I do see what he meant but, as I write, the FTSE100 stock market index is at 99.9 per cent of its value of a year ago – nothing new there then, and yet the media report on its minor spasms many times a day.

David Attenborough has given much of his life to putting the beauty of nature in

POLICY EXCHANGE (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)



Environment secretary Liz Truss has been curiously inactive on the subject of wildlife, but if she's not trying to achieve anything at least she won't be a failure when she leaves office ...

“A few weeks ago, I was told by a very respected and senior journalist that they couldn't make more of the environment unless there were some new stories”

front of our eyes, first in black and white and then in colour, and has spoken out more and more forcefully about the loss of wildlife in his later years. I am of the generation who benefited hugely from that experience; when world travel was much more difficult, the world was brought into our lives through TV programmes such as *Zoo Quest*.

It seems to me that wildlife has dropped off the hard news agenda and is now seen as a 'fluffy' subject to soften the mood in between reports of economic or humanitarian disaster. The BBC's excellent flagship Radio 4 *Today* programme is still required listening in my life, but I miss the serious coverage that they used to give to wildlife loss. When will John Humphrys give Liz Truss a roasting? ■



Do this in September

- This government is due to expire in 2020 – at the same time that biodiversity commitments will be assessed globally. Write to Liz Truss at DEFRA, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR, to ask how her department's actions will enable Britain to meet its commitments, and if living in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland put your environment minister on the spot too.
- Look out for your opportunity to comment on the BBC Charter discussions; be a critical friend.



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LUCY MCROBERT Feed the birds?

Is putting out food for the birds a good thing? Lucy McRobert's simple question could be a lot more complicated than it first seems.

Over the past few months, a debate has been developing in the birding community on the rights and wrongs of feeding birds. Largely this has focused on scarcities or rarities – putting seed down for a Cretzschmar's Bunting, releasing live locusts for a Red-footed Falcon or mealworms for a Desert Wheatear – but it has also raised some wider, more philosophical questions.

The word this all hinges on is 'manipulation': are we manipulating behaviour for our own gains, and if so what are the consequences? The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) feed Bewick's and Whooper Swans (and inadvertently lots of other wildfowl); Red Kites are artificially supplemented, too, at several popular feeding stations. As these spectacles are advertised to the general public, there is a clear engagement policy – it is not just about the birds.

However, these demonstrations are very forward thinking. They generate money for the local economy, raise awareness, connect huge numbers of people to wildlife, and create income to carry out conservation work and assist the species (both individuals and the wider population), all at the same time.

You can expand that further, right down to household level. Some estimates suggest that two-thirds of the population feed the birds – from the elderly or housebound who take comfort in their feathered friends to children hanging up homemade fat balls. In a landscape less than conciliatory towards wildlife, what would happen to bird populations if they weren't supported by supplementary feeding in gardens?

Then there's habituation: from Grey Seals and Pine Martens to House Sparrows and White-tailed Eagles, when a species begins to associate people with food, or even to beg for it, arguably we have taken the manipulation of behaviour too far. It can lead to irritation – when wildlife gets over-familiar and begins to expect food – or even persecution. This has happened with Red Kites in Oxfordshire and urban Foxes all over, which are labelled as pests (perpetuated by a negative media).

These acts are much easier to justify when

JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)



The Cretzschmar's Bunting on Bardsey Island in June was fed by bird observatory staff. Is the feeding of rarities right in certain circumstances?

they are motivated by compassion. Maybe it was because of the tales of lashing wind, driving rain and blizzard conditions, but the birding community seemed genuinely moved and enthralled by the Desert Wheatear in Aberdeenshire in winter 2012. With an unwavering dedication in the wildest weather, Tim Marshall regularly checked on the lost waif and occasionally gave it some food too.

I don't understand the need to feed birds – rare or commonplace – just to get a better photograph, though. Is it about who has the best shot on their blog? Because I'll be amazed if it's about income. Releasing a non-native into the wild or impaling dead voles on a hedge to lure a Steppe Grey Shrike seems wrong. The Staffordshire Red-footed Falcon was around when its food source was abundant – it was hardly going to starve. There wasn't anything cruel about it, just a little bit unnecessary.

It's natural to want to be close to wildlife. I'm convinced that it's a big driver for people to ring birds, and at the other end of the scale why some want to swim with dolphins or ride elephants. Being in close proximity to wildlife is exhilarating – maybe because it's so rare nowadays to experience it regularly. While few can claim total selflessness in their motivations, if it brings people closer to nature and ultimately helps a species continue on its wild, merry way, then call me a hypocrite and sign me up for the next swan feed! ■

If it ultimately helps a species, call me a hypocrite and sign me up for the next swan feed!

Lucy McRobert returns in November.



DAVID KJAER (WWW.DAVIDKJAER.COM)

The daylight hunter

A regular winter visitor as well as a scarce breeder, this stunning owl is a favourite among birders and non-birders alike. David Callahan takes an in-depth look at the life and times of that charismatic diurnal predator, Short-eared Owl.

Of our regular winter visitors, perhaps the most charismatic and looked forward to is Short-eared Owl. Only a scarce breeding species in Britain, but with a cosmopolitan distribution over the northern Hemisphere and forays into the Tropics, this characterful species has much to offer the committed birder, as well as the casual observer.

Short-eared Owl is a medium-sized owl, coarsely patterned with black, buff and white on the upperparts, a streaked chest and pale lower underparts, and a black- and buff-barred tail. Adults are similar, though females average darker than males; juveniles are somewhat paler. Like many owls it has a distinctive face pattern, with particularly prominent yellow eyes set in between pale buff 'cheeks' and a white beak surround and 'eyebrows'.

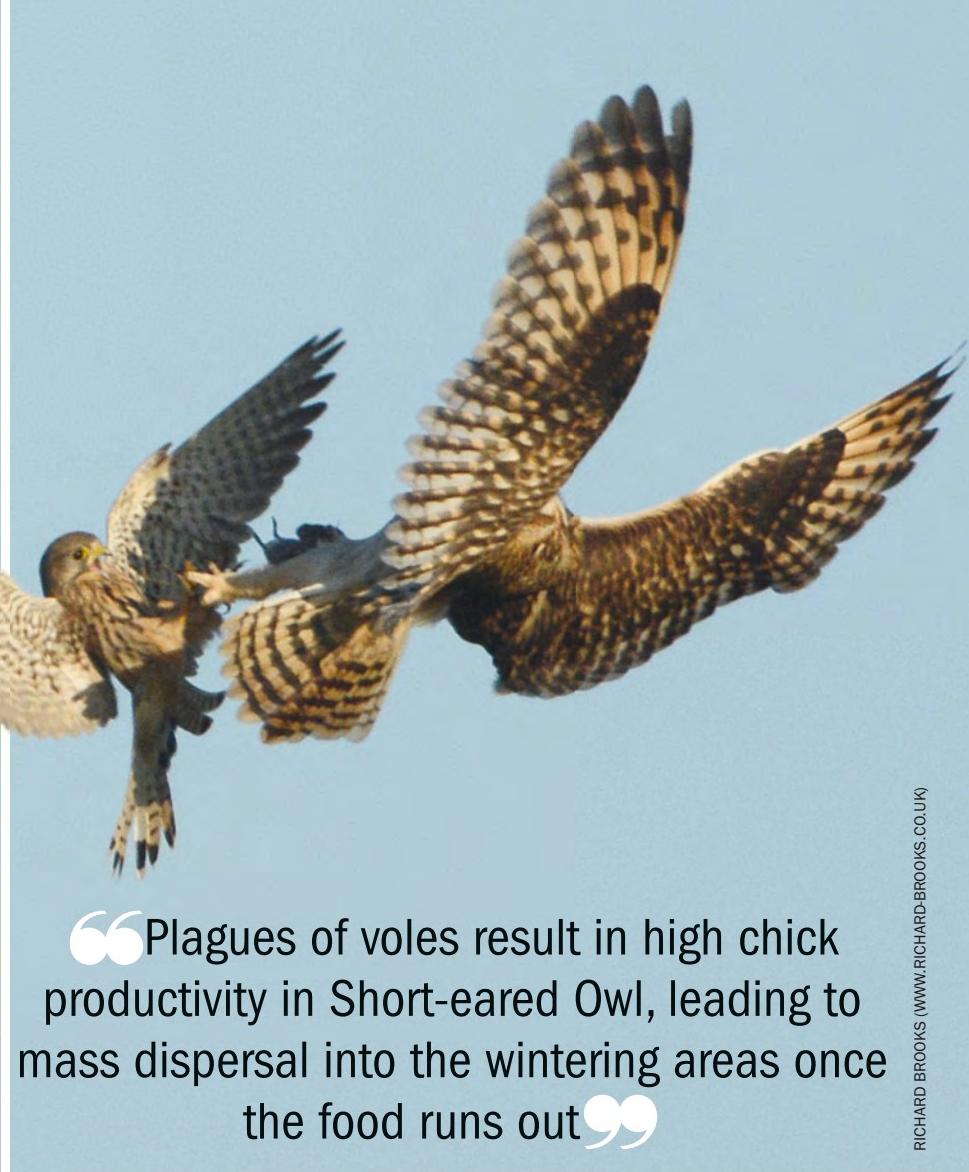
Like its closest relative Long-eared Owl, a relationship confirmed by recent genome analysis, Short-eared's feet and legs are densely feathered with down, though the soles are

bare. The fluffy upper surface cuts down on sound generated in flight, while the stippled soles aid the gripping of wriggling prey. It is partially diurnal and can be seen flying at all times of the day, occasionally even thermalling on the lower wind eddies, when its relatively long wings – pale underneath and with a black carpal patch and bright orange and black 'hand' – can be seen well.

Hearing aid

The nominal 'ears' are actually short feather tufts above the eyes, which are for displaying. As in many other owls, the species' real ears are concealed below and to the rear of their eyes, and are asymmetrically placed to aid prey location in low light. Their eyesight is also adapted for hunting in dim light, and the activities of Deermice in the United States have been shown to diminish with brightening light as a response to the risk of being caught by Short-eared Owls.

Short-eared Owl is declining in Britain, as well as across Europe as a whole. It is Amber listed as a Species of Conservation Concern in the UK.



RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)

“Plagues of voles result in high chick productivity in Short-eared Owl, leading to mass dispersal into the wintering areas once the food runs out”



Short-eared Owl's main prey is voles (above). Kestrels will attempt to steal food items from the owl, resulting in some spectacular clashes (top).

The prey almost entirely consists of voles, though individuals have been seen to take tern fledglings, Common Redshank and Meadow Pipit, as well as stealing prey items from Kestrels and Stoats. Kestrels also kleptoparasitise Short-eared Owls, particularly in still conditions when hovering expends more energy. This has been seen to occur on a daily basis in western France, making up for the loss of 50 per cent of prey items that occurs during weak winds.

Other prey items found in both contemporary and fossil Short-eared Owl pellets include frogs, shrews, mice, moles and Rabbits. A fairly high proportion of birds are also taken, with pipits, thrushes, warblers, gamebird chicks, chats and pulli of its own species forming part of its diet.

The availability of the species' main prey also controls its movements to varying degrees, much as lemmings control the movements of Snowy Owl further north. This is most notable in northern Europe, where plagues of voles result in high chick productivity in Short-eared Owl, and lead to mass dispersal into the wintering areas once the food runs out.

Influxes to Britain from Scandinavia are evident when birds appear at favoured sites in numbers, but can also be witnessed by lucky observers: 50 were seen to arrive ‘in off’ at Titchwell RSPB, Norfolk, on 13 October 2011, while the same number was logged in Cornwall in October 1979, with double figures arriving at many sites elsewhere that autumn. The species has been shown to wander for many hundreds of miles when food is short in its natal areas.

SPECIES PROFILE

JULIAN HOUGH



In flight Short-eared Owl is paler, more stocky and longer-winged than Long-eared Owl, and the tail and wings are more boldly barred.

Winter roosts are communal and can hold up to 40 birds, although six to 12 is more usual; more than 100 have been counted in The Netherlands after a good vole year, however. Roosts are on or close to the ground among grass tussocks or low shrubs and timber stacks, and can remain at traditional sites if undisturbed. One or two individuals of this species have been located in communal Long-eared Owl roosts, too.

On display

Wing-clapping by the male is used to attract a mate; this mostly occurs in winter, as birds are often paired off by the end of February. The bird rises rapidly in the air, bouncing

as it ascends, as part of a complex display flight. It then slaps its stretched wings together five or six times to create loud snapping sounds, almost like a gunshot. Males also give an 'advertising call' consisting of a low-pitched steam train-like *boo-boo-boo*, while both sexes can emit a barking sound which acts more as a means of staying in contact. The species also has various whistles and scolds among its repertoire, the meanings of which are yet to be unravelled.

Male rivals will grapple in flight, which can make for rather dramatic combat, with raised and interlocked claws and each combatant attempting to get above its opponent, sometimes with the bird dropping rapidly towards the ground,



Males will fight over breeding territories, with each combatant trying to get above its opponent.

TONY COOMBS (WWW.WINGSANDTHINGSPHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK)

In a good year, Short-eared Owl chicks have a 27 per cent survival rate, with most in-nest deaths caused by the dominant chick eating its siblings

uttering deeply resonant barking calls. The victor will circle its territory, clapping its wings rapidly and frequently below its body. Once breeding has commenced, males quite happily use the same hunting areas without much conflict, perhaps to conserve energy while providing for the chicks.

Pairs are serially monogamous as a rule (though males are occasionally bigamous), generally forming new pair bonds each year but remaining faithful during the breeding season. Birds hold breeding territories but will often feed outside these areas. Mating begins during the species' second calendar year, and between four to eight white, elliptical eggs are laid (the number being dependent on the density of voles)



JARI PELTONIÄKI (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

Four to eight white eggs are laid in a scrape on the ground (above). Larger, more dominant chicks have been observed eating their smaller siblings. The chicks fledge at around 27 days (above right).



STEFAN PFUTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)

between mid-April and mid-May in a scrappily lined scrape on the ground, usually hidden among dense tufts of grass, heather, sedges or reeds. After 26 days or so of incubation, the helpless, nest-bound young are tended to solely by the female, leaving the nest after around 15 days but finally fledging at up to 27 days.

In a good year, Short-eared Owl chicks have a 27 per cent survival rate, with most in-nest deaths caused by the dominant chick eating its siblings. This behaviour was first described in *The Auk* in 1959 after an incident on the Northumberland moors, when a Mr James Alder of Ponteland, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, dramatically and gruesomely described the whittling

SPECIES PROFILE



RON JONES



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Short-eared is our most diurnal owl species and can be seen hunting at any time of day, often quartering over open country (above). It is perhaps best looked for in winter, when numbers are boosted by migrants from the Continent. Winter communal roosts (below left) can hold up to 40 birds.

down of a brood of seven: "There were now only five young in the nest, two having previously disappeared. Three of these were quite sturdy; the other two were smaller. After about an hour of watching, the larger birds became very restless and presently one of them reached out and pulled at the head of a small one. It then picked it up and attempted to swallow it head first. This horrified me but I realised in a flash that here was the explanation of the seemingly inexplicable reduction in the size of this family, and also in one the previous year which had fallen from six chicks to three. I therefore restrained an urge to rush out and interfere in what was happening. The larger owlet presently dropped the chick but after a few minutes again reached out and picked it up by its head. This time it succeeded in swallowing it, and after much writhing and gulping, only its feet showed. The chick, I remember, was appreciably bigger than a mouse and I recall being amazed that the older nestling had been able to swallow it whole."

Both the number of eggs which hatch and the survival rate are driven by the availability of voles and other small mammals, and in a bad year just two per cent of chicks or less will fledge. Owl offspring are also taken by corvids and Foxes, with one earth being found to contain the remains of eight adults and 68 chicks. But in a good year, many survive to disperse far from their nest sites.

Short-eared Owl is a scarce breeder in Britain and Ireland, favouring uplands and islands in northern England (particularly the Pennines) and Scotland (with a concentration on Orkney and the Outer Hebrides). There are a few pairs in Northern Ireland and very few in the Republic. Typical breeding habitat involves rough grassland, coastal marshes, heather moorland, bogs and young conifer plantations.

The British population's fortunes have reflected an overall decline in Europe by diminishing even more rapidly, with numbers and range roughly halving since the late 1960s.

The remains of frogs, shrews, mice, moles, rabbits and birds have all been found in Short-eared Owl pellets.



Below: Galápagos Short-eared Owl (below) is notably buffier than nominate. It is the only one of 11 recognised subspecies currently considered as a contender for full species status.

JOHN RICHARDSON



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

Causes are hard to determine, as nomadism and intermittent influxes obscure the species' true status, but less plantation growth and an element of disturbance are almost certainly factors.

The use of conifer plantations by Short-eared Owls for breeding has been found to be closely tied with the age of the saplings. The maximum age of plantations used by the predator is 12 years, with a peak density between three to seven years, which is when the highest density of voles is also present.

In winter, the species is more numerous and more skewed to the southern two-thirds of the country, with British coasts and less populated inland lowlands benefiting from an annual but variably numbered invasion from Scandinavia. Again, there has been a 19 per cent range contraction since the late 1960s, but the small Irish wintering population has remained stable.

New species?

Worldwide, Short-eared Owl has 11 recognised subspecies, with the nominate form *Asio flammeus flammeus* being found in suitable habitat throughout much of the northern hemisphere in the temperate and sub-Arctic zones, moving as far south as West Africa, India, South-East Asia, Japan and central Mexico in winter. Subspecific variation occurs in South America (with different subspecies from Venezuela/Guyana, Colombia/Ecuador/Peru and southern Peru across to Tierra del Fuego) and on islands such as PohPei, Hawai'i, Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and the Falkland Islands. Galápagos Short-eared Owl *Af galapagoensis* is the only insular form currently considered as a serious contender for full species status.

In Britain we are fortunate that Short-eared Owl can be seen all year round, but lowland and coastal birders in particular look forward to those autumn days when the first reports of birds arriving come in, and where the most reliable sites will produce intimate and active views of this beautiful and dramatic raptor. With luck, you'll be able to enjoy the species all winter and all day long quartering grasslands and saltmarshes. Hopefully, you can also now appreciate how lucky you are to see the species, as well as how fortunate it is to have survived the brutal whims of the waxing and waning of small mammal populations, cannibalism and migration.

In any case there are few sights more exciting and uplifting on a frosty winter's morning than to see a Short-eared Owl floating over grass and reeds, perhaps even staring right at you with an unconcerned challenge in its eyes, truly a master of its world. ■

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Always discovering

After the huge success of his book *Challenge Series: Autumn*, Martin Garner introduces the second title in the series, and takes a look at some of the particular ID problems associated with this time of year.



This first-calendar-year Grey-headed Wagtail (of the subspecies *thunbergi*) was present in September 2014 at Flamborough, East Yorkshire. Immature Yellow Wagtails are usually thought to be almost unidentifiable in the field, but the blackish lores and cheek surrounds in this bird, combined with the white throat fading to yellow, appear to indicate Grey-headed.

MARTIN GARNER

Delighted: the response and take-up of the first book in the *Challenge Series*, covering autumn (see *Birdwatch* 267: 45-50, was overwhelmingly positive and beyond our best expectations. So here's the second offering. That realm 'discovery', for which we try to beat the drum, seems to continue unabated. We hope book two brings inspiration for readers to make their own discoveries.

The ethos of the book remains the same. I have endeavoured to pack each page with information about little-known birds or tricky identification challenges. Some of the material is difficult to find anywhere else, or is at the cutting edge of bird identification. This new material needs testing. I certainly don't imagine it's the last word and in some cases it might just be the first. It's an open invitation to my fellow members of the birding community to dive into the book and then to go out discovering, exploring and adding to our collective knowledge.

The mantra I like to use is 'always

PROFILE



MARTIN GARNER is a world-renowned birder and bird identification expert who has written numerous papers on a range of ID problems. He is also a member of the Rarities Committee.

discovering'. It's not meant to be trite and is quite genuine. I am aware that I am learning new things about birds and wildlife all the time. I'm very fortunate, as some may know, to live by the coast at Flamborough in East Yorkshire. Nevertheless, much of my discovering has been done inland, far from clear migration routes. So here are a few of the discoveries from the last year on 'my patch'.

Baltic Gull and Grey-headed Wagtail

I saw both of these just over the fence at the end of my garden. I only just paid enough attention to the Grey-headed Wagtail to follow through and spend a couple of hours to get good enough views to confirm my thoughts. I

followed up by putting out photographs and describing the bird, and it quickly became evident that many did not know the features of an autumn Grey-headed Wagtail that would help identify them. Several records from around the British coastline followed.

Another curiosity was the rise of 'Baltic Gull' locally. With a good number of clued-up observers, the number of Caspian Gulls has rocketed at Flamborough from less than annual to 15-20 individuals last autumn alone. In among this movement were two or three candidate Baltic Gulls, shorthand for the nominate *fuscus* form of Lesser Black-backed Gull which breeds in the Baltic and northern Norway; again this is not a taxon that people were aware could be identified in the field. Despite this, when keen gull gurus have seen the photographs, most agreed my little pale juvenile was an outstandingly good potential young Baltic Gull.

This has inspired us to explore the subject further and to look for more individuals. One with a colour ring would be really good!

Brünnich's Guillemot *Iomvia*

Often less clear-cut white oval patch over throat/ upper breast.

First-winters have shorter weaker bill than adults.

Diagnostic head pattern of blackish over all of the upper section of the head with well demarcated breast band. White oval patch variable from large and well demarcated to smaller with diffuse edges.

Prominent breast band of even width forms lower border to white oval patch.

Brünnich's
Guillemot
Razorbill

Brünnich's Guillemot *Iomvia* | March M. Garner

Brünnich's Guillemot *Iomvia* | March M. Garner

Brünnich's Guillemot *Iomvia* | December M. Pearson

LARGE AUKS 37

Brünnich's Guillemot

The icing on the discovery cake was seeing a species I knew very well from abroad, except this time it flew past under the cliffs at the end of my road: Brünnich's Guillemot.

This species is generally considered unidentifiable in flight as a vagrant. However, as you can see from the illustration above, and in further detail in *Challenge Series: Winter*, there

is very good reason to believe they are both identifiable and occurring more frequently than the number of claimed fly-bys would suggest.

Rufous and Oriental Turtle Doves

This does not relate to an individual I have seen at Flamborough yet, unfortunately. I did find one with friends in Israel, and in the course of researching

the subject for this book, found that new features had been uncovered and also that there was likely to be an intergrade population, or at least a number of intermediate individuals. In this regard it's clear that intermediate/intergrade birds have reached western Europe and elsewhere as vagrants, and where they have been robustly accepted as either *orientalis* or *meena*, some of those identifications may need to be reviewed.

The challenges

The overview of *Challenge Series: Winter* can be broadly categorised into the following three challenges.

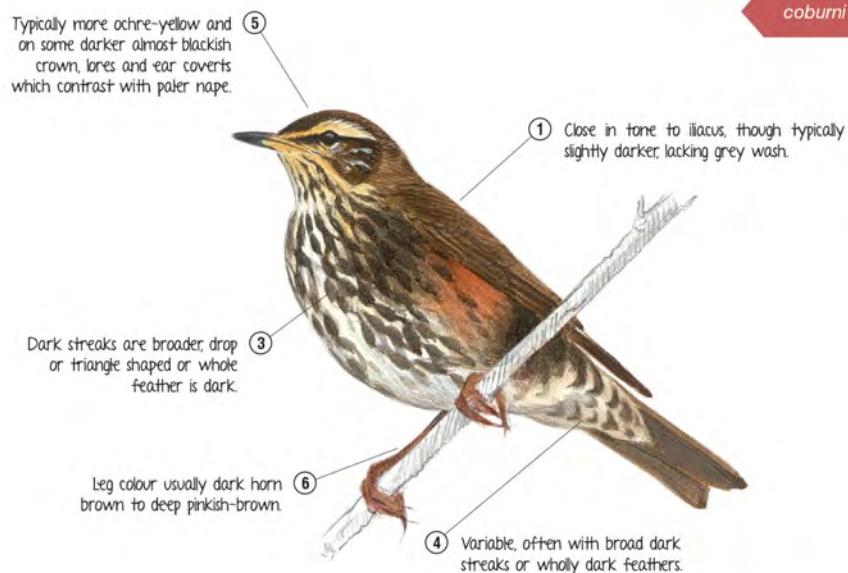
Overlooked local birds

Birds are migratory. This fact is quickly learnt by the novice birder, but what

took me a lot longer to grasp was that many species, especially subspecies of birds that I saw regularly, could have counterparts whose migration took them right to my doorstep, and yet I never knew it.

A couple of obvious ones that appear

in the book are Icelandic Redwing and the three different types of Snow Bunting. In the case of the former, this is surely overlooked and yet very often identifiable. There have been almost 40 records on the little German island of Heligoland in the North Sea, and yet



Icelandic Redwing coburni | October
N. van Duvendijk



Icelandic Redwing coburni | November
O. Óskarsson



Icelandic Redwing coburni | November
O. Óskarsson



Icelandic Redwing coburni | November
O. Óskarsson

Icelandic Redwing is scarcely recorded on the English east coast.

Redwing is found in the vast majority of winter bird survey squares all over Britain, but Icelandic Redwing is grossly under-represented in local bird reports. I hope the chapter in *Challenge Series: Winter* redresses the balance. Here's a challenge: find an Icelandic Redwing this winter in your local area. It's probably a county rarity and may even be a county first.

Snow Buntings are notoriously nomadic; indeed, some recent research indicates they may well be travelling far further than our current understanding. In this context the identification of Snow Buntings to correct age, sex and form is a challenge rarely undertaken, as it is often deemed too difficult in the field.

We've tried to tackle this using the common practice of Snow Buntings stretching their wings and tail, which can reveal much information relating to sex, subspecies and age. Many are identifiable and could establish more accurate proportions of the two commonly occurring forms which breed in Iceland and Scandinavia – by the way, did you know that they both breed in northern Scotland?

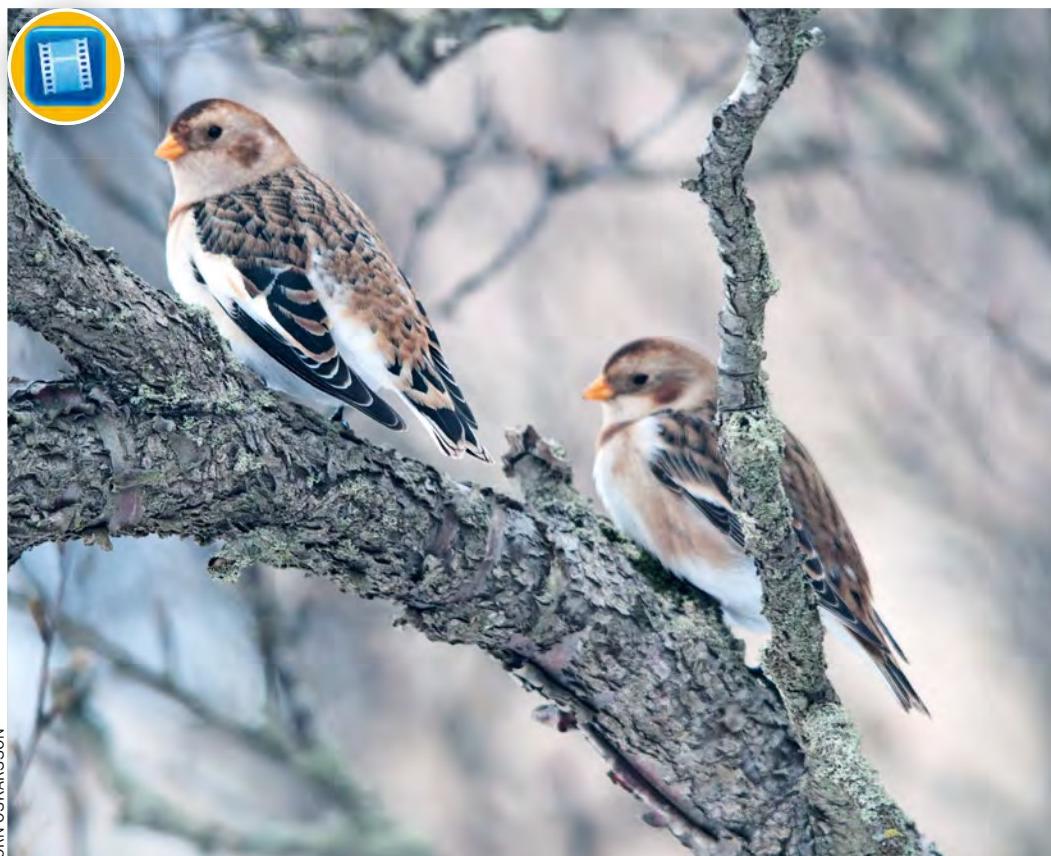
Then there is the rare Siberian Snow Bunting. A most beautiful passerine in its own right, this form is very likely



MIKE WATSON

Above: this female nominate *nivalis* Snow Bunting, photographed on Pendle Hill, Cheshire, in November 2013, shows the plumage tones that might be expected on the form most likely to be seen in Britain. But are other taxa also waiting to be discovered?

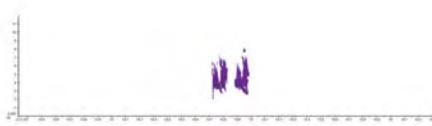
Left: winter male Icelandic Snow Buntings (of the subspecies *insulæ*), such as this February bird (left-hand individual), have darker upperparts and breastbands than nominate *nivalis*. Note also that there is more black on the tail and flight feathers, though it takes in-depth comparison and scrutiny (preferably with good-quality photographs) to see this definitively.



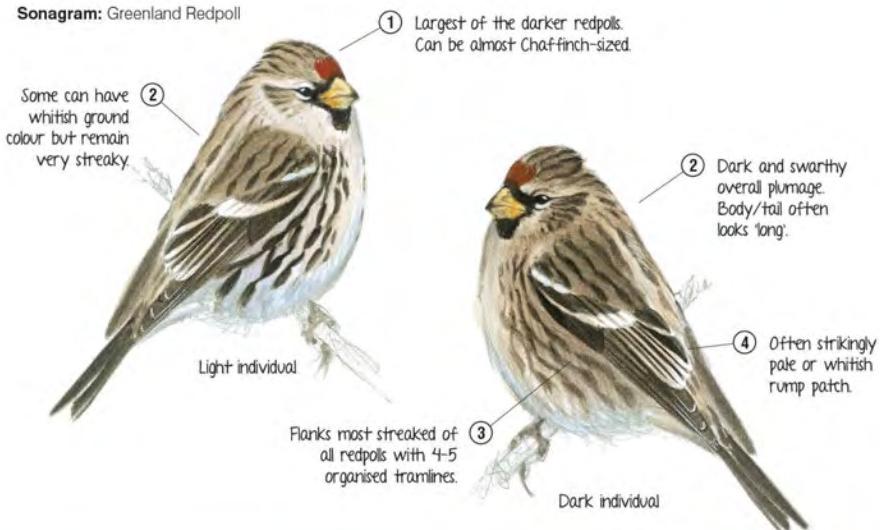
ÖRN ÓSKARSSON



rostrata



Sonagram: Greenland Redpoll



Greenland Redpoll rostrata | October

M. Garner



Greenland Redpoll rostrata | October

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Greenland Redpoll rostrata | October

M. Garner



Greenland Redpoll rostrata | October

M. Garner

to be overlooked through lack of awareness of its field characters.

Tricky ID challenges and opportunities

An early goal for the *Challenge Series* was to include as much information in the simplest format. In this winter book we have addressed challenges such as Blyth's and Richard's Pipits, and the Arctic Peregrine Falcon subspecies,

potential vagrants from Siberia and North America.

One species pair which we have focused on is Gyr Falcon versus Saker Falcon, a genuine raptor challenge. Even though dark-morph Gyr Falcons have been recorded since the late 19th century, there's a great wariness about attempting to identify them. Similarly with the Saker Falcon. However, there are sufficient plumage features which make many

individuals of both species identifiable.

Saker Falcon deserves much greater attention as a potential vagrant, now that satellite tagging has demonstrated that young birds disperse from the nest in a wide variety of directions and covering distances that make them eminently likely to appear in north-west Europe as genuinely wild birds.

We have dived into the redpoll challenge, with all six taxa covered in

detail, some of which, like Greenland Redpoll, can't be found even in the most modern and up-to-date field guides. This is despite the fact that Greenland Redpolls have reached well inland and as far as southern Britain. In an endeavour to communicate redpoll identification with a little more simplicity, we created the 'redpoll code'. You'll have to buy the book to find out what that's about.

New birds for Britain

Forewarned is forearmed, so they say. Chapters in the new book include Northern Shrike and its distinguishing features from Great Grey Shrike. Northern Shrike is likely to be reviewed as a full species due to its genetic differences. Siberian Northern Shrike has already reached as near to Britain as western Norway – it can only be a matter of time before one is found here.

The status of Buff-bellied Pipit from America has changed dramatically in only a few years, with several found well inland in places such as London and Oxfordshire. The features are becoming more familiar, so now it must



This juvenile Saker Falcon (photographed in June) with its boldly streaked underparts belongs to a species not yet accepted as a vagrant to Britain, though examples have been identified here. Satellite-tagged birds from eastern Europe have wandered as far as Portugal and West Africa, indicating the potential for a genuine vagrant to appear here one day.

TOM LINDROOS



TORMOD AMUNDSEN

be the turn of its Siberian counterpart – *japonicus* – which probably deserves full species status. We lay out key points, photographs, illustrations, a map and a sonogram in the hope that observers are better informed.

Finally, we cover enigmas like the Black Guillemot of the high Arctic, also known as ‘Mandt’s Guillemot’ from a time when it was separated as a full species. Heraldng the arrival of the new book, a first-summer Mandt’s Guillemot turned up for one day in The Netherlands, right on cue, just as I began to write this article. It’s very likely that the next Mandt’s Guillemot to turn up anywhere in north-west Europe will receive a lot more attention. I very much hope the new book will be a helpful part of that process. Hope you enjoy it! ■

Dark-morph Gyr Falcons, like this second-calendar-year bird, are very similar to Saker Falcon, and could present a potential identification pitfall should either appear in Britain, though their ranges are usually widely separate.

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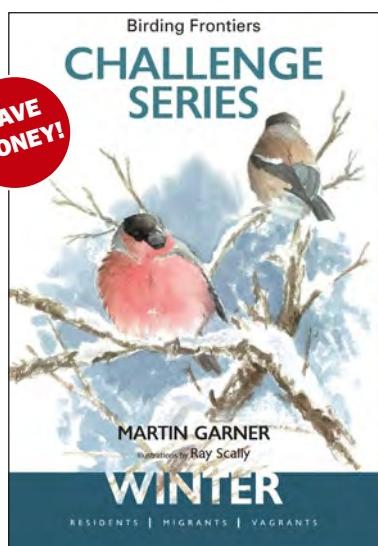
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FOLLOWING hot on the heels of the incredibly popular *Autumn ID* guide, this second instalment in the *Challenge Series* looks at winter conundrums. Covering resident, wintering and vagrant species, the book

is packed with little-known birds or tricky identification questions. Much of the material is brand new, and Martin Garner lays down a challenge to readers: go out and test this cutting-edge information. Each challenge is accompanied by concise and accessible text, along with photos, illustrations and sonograms. Further information is revealed through the use of QR codes.

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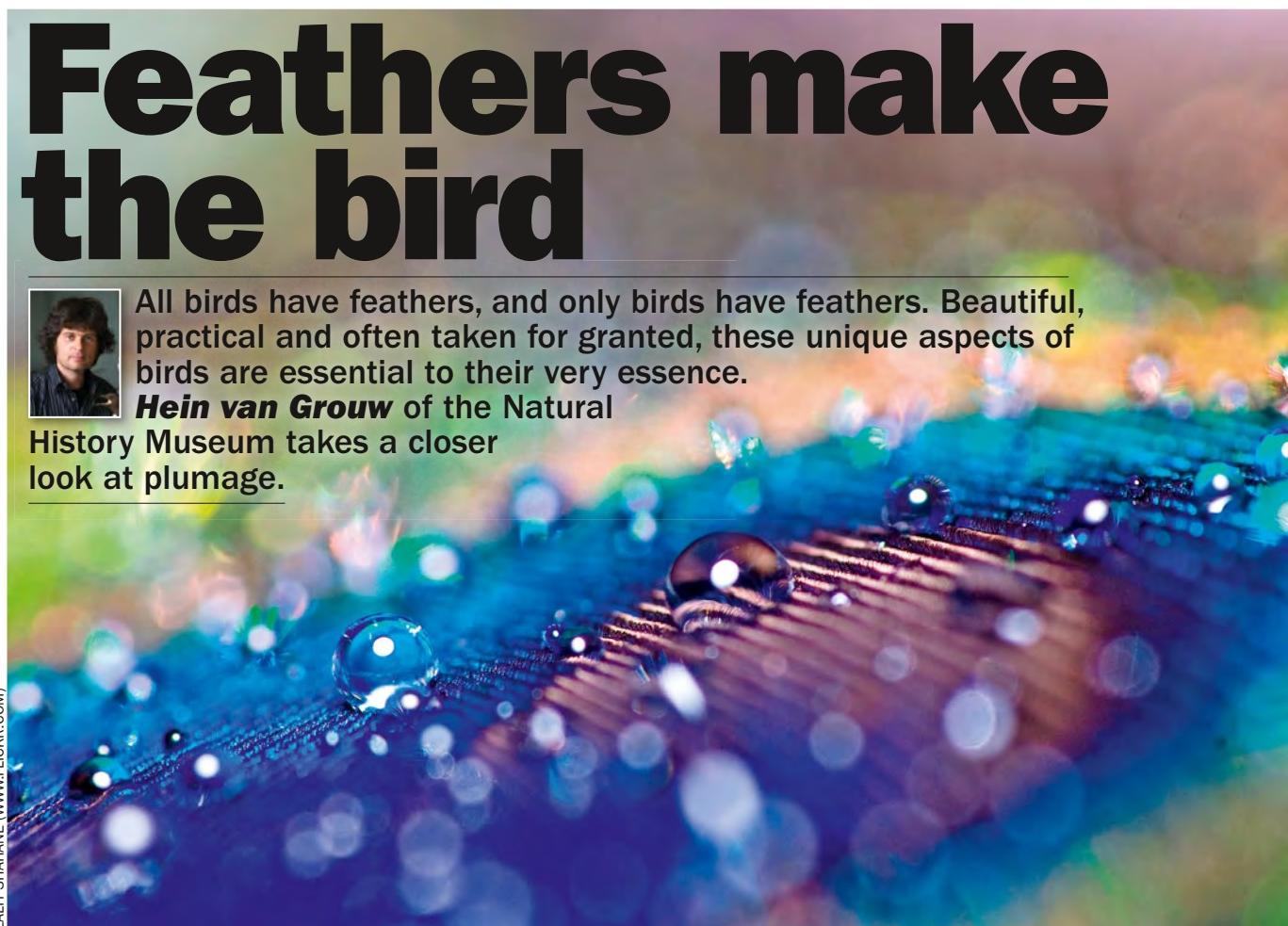
Feathers make the bird



All birds have feathers, and only birds have feathers. Beautiful, practical and often taken for granted, these unique aspects of birds are essential to their very essence.

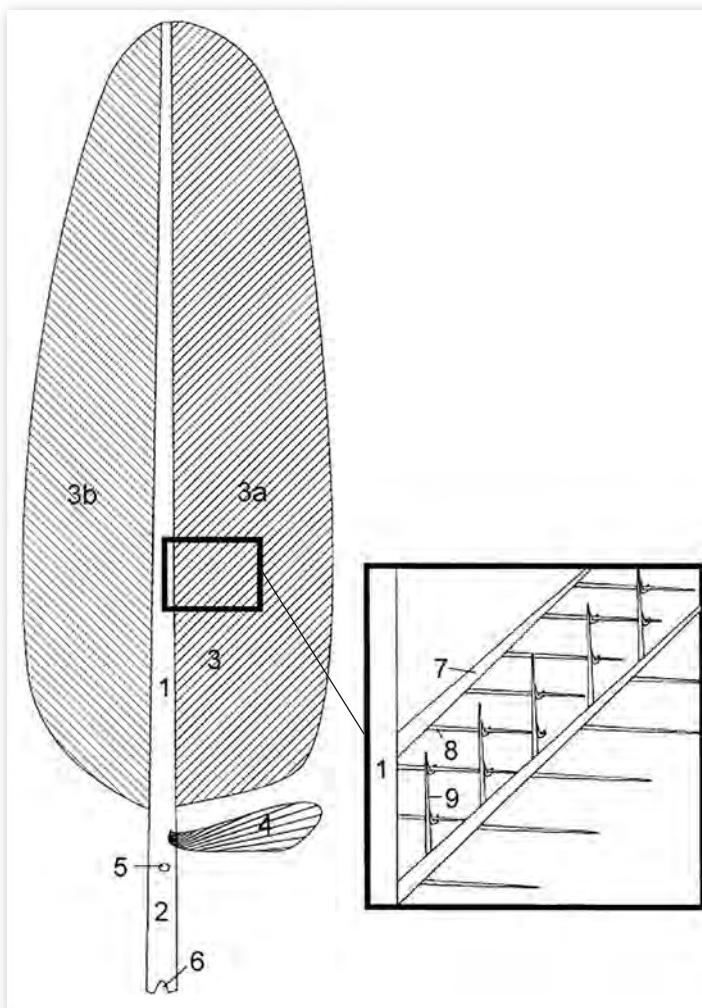
Hein van Grouw of the Natural History Museum takes a closer look at plumage.

LALIT SHAHANE (WWW.FLICKR.COM)



Above: the iridescence of a male Indian Peafowl's tail feather is an example of structural coloration – its basic pigmentation is brown, but its structure results in almost metallic-looking blues, turquoises and greens.

Right: a schematic drawing of a contour feather showing: 1: rachis; 2: calamus; 3: vane composed of barbs (incorporating 3a, outer vane, and 3b, inner vane); 4: afterfeather or hypopenna; 5 and 6: upper and lower openings; 7: barb; 8 and 9: barbules.



Feathers come in all shapes and sizes. They are made of keratin and their structure is simple as well as ingenious. Feathers appear very fragile, but are in fact tough and strong because of the resilience of their base material. Their simple 'interlocking' structure means that damaged feathers can usually be readily eased back into shape.

Feathers are one of the distinguishing features of all birds; they evolved to fulfil the primary functions of flight and insulation. But sexual selection has pushed their basic design to increasingly radical extremes. Some apparently cause more hindrance to their owner, for example by obstructing flight or providing excessive drag, or making the bird conspicuous to predators. Others do not appear to be feathers at all, such as the hair-like crown of the crowned cranes or the outlandish plumes of some birds-of-paradise.

However, the basic structure of all feathers is the same, and it's due to the simplicity of this blueprint that such astounding diversity has become possible.

The main type of feather is the contour feather; these enable birds to fly and give them their shape. Special types of contour feathers are the so-called 'ornamental feathers'. These

UWE GILLE (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

COVER STORY

The drake Garganey's unique scapular plumes distinguish it from other dabbling ducks, and have evolved from contour feathers.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



make up plumages that have developed to be impressive, such as a male Indian Peafowl's tail.

Structure

A feather is a specialised product of the skin (epidermis) and is made of keratin, just like hair, nails and horns. The basic structure of all feathers is the same: a shaft with a long series of side branches (barbs) on either side. A barb consists of a ramus, which itself also bears two rows of side branches, the barbules. The part of the shaft which bears the barbs is the rachis and is more or less solid. The lower part of the shaft, without attaching barbs, is called the calamus; this sticks into the skin via the feather follicle and is hollow.

A barbule is divided into a flattened base and an elongated pennulum. The latter is usually longer than the base, tapers and ends as the pointed tip of the barbule. Two neighbouring barbs are locked together when the hooklets present on one barbule catch on the obverse edges of the next barbule. This interlocking system forms the feather vanes and is what characterises the typical contour feather structure. At the base of the rachis, before the vane starts, there are normally a few barbs with non-interlocking barbules forming the small downy part.

Different types of feathers can be recognised, but the contour feather is quantitatively the most important and probably the fundamental type. The other types are down and semiplumes, powder down, bristles (eyelashes) and filoplumes (see the box on page 47 for descriptions of these feathers).

Arrangement

Except for a few species that have visible areas of bare skin, birds appear to be



Flamingo feathers derive their colour from the birds' diet – in this case, carotenoid pigments which originate in crustaceans such as shrimps. The intensity of the pink is produced when a shrimp's pigments dissolve in fat, an effect also replicated in the cooking process.

DIANA ROBINSON (WWW.FLICKR.COM)



HARRY TAYLOR (NHM LONDON)

A combination of both melanins together can give a wide colour range, varying through all shades of black, grey, dark brown and reddish brown. This is where the familiar dapper colours of a male House Sparrow come from, seen in close-up here.



Left: the blue in a Jay's wing coverts is not pigment but structural blue, caused by black melanin in the feather cells and selective light reflection due to the fine structure of the feather.

Below: spreading and quivering the wings to accentuate the bold patterning is used by Jays in antagonistic, defensive and breeding display behaviours.

HARRY TAYLOR (NHM LONDON)



“Green and blue colours are structural and the result of the interference of light on black melanin”



EDWIN KATS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

fully and evenly covered with feathers. However, most species have their plumage growing from relatively limited feather tracts. Contour feathers grow only in these tracts and are arranged in orderly groupings. As well as the contour feathers, tracts may also contain down or powder down feathers, but these can also grow on the intervening spaces between the tracts.

Landbirds usually have narrow feather tracts, on about half of the skin area. The rest of the body has essentially bare skin, overlain by the feathers that fan out from adjoining tracts and cover the intervening spaces. Waterbirds tend to have wider feather tracts, and narrow spaces in between filled with down. Only in ratites, penguins and screamers are the contour feathers distributed uniformly over the body, but still arranged in rows.

Replacement

Birds replace their feathers regularly by a process known as moult, and this usually occurs once a year. Periodic replacement of feathers is needed to maintain a high level of their functions (flight, insulation and so on). Replacement also allows seasonal changes in appearance, often related to reproduction. Flight feathers (primaries) are often replaced in a way that affects flight capability. Most commonly, the short innermost primary is shed first. When this feather is half grown, the next one will shed and moult proceeds steadily in this way towards the longer outermost feathers.

Some birds completely lose the power of flight during moult, including ducks, geese and swans. The colourful male duck species will lose their distinctive body plumage before the wing feathers

are replaced. They become more like the cryptically coloured females, with a temporary plumage called eclipse plumage. The drakes are then less conspicuously coloured during their flightless period. When the new wing feathers are almost fully grown, the second moult of body plumage will take place, resulting in the colourful breeding dress once again.

Colour

In general, feather colour is the result of biological pigments (biochromes), structural colour (selective light reflection due to the composition of the feather), or a combination of the two. The two most common pigments that determine plumage colour in birds are melanins and carotenoids. Another pigment, only found in parrots (Psittacidae), is psittacin. Lastly, there

are the porphyrins which are relatively rare in birds.

There are two forms of melanin: eumelanin and phaeomelanin. Depending on concentration and distribution within the feather, eumelanin is responsible for black, grey and dark brown feathers, whereas phaeomelanin is responsible for warm reddish-brown to pale buff. Both melanins together can give a wide range of greyish-brown colours.

In several species the (adult) colour is caused by eumelanin only; for example, in most crows, gulls and terns, tits, parrots, woodpeckers, auks, oystercatchers and the male Blackbird. However, in most species both types of melanin are present. There is no species in which only phaeomelanin occurs.

Carotenoids are responsible for colours ranging from pale yellow to scarlet red. They cannot be synthesised by the birds themselves but have to be acquired from their food and transformed into colour pigments by enzymes. Psittacin, unique to parrots, is also responsible for yellow, orange and red, but is not diet-dependent. Porphyrins, normally responsible for reddish-brown colours, are formed by the breakdown of hemoglobin by the liver. They are sporadically found in a variety of bird groups including owls, nightjars, bustards, turacos and galliformes.

Pigments are mainly distributed in the feather barbs. The melanins are situated in the centre (medulla) of the barb cells while, if present, the carotenoids and psittacins are in the outer layer (cortex) of the cells.

The colours green and blue, which are very common in birds, are not pigments. These colours are structural and the result of the interference of light. It is the structure of the space between the cortex and the medulla of a barb cell, called the cloudy layer, that creates a constructive interference. This structure removes all colours except blue from incident white light and if the medulla is filled with black melanin it produces a blue feather. If in the same feather cell, the cortex also contains yellow carotenoid/psittacin, then a green colour is produced.

A special form of structural colour is iridescence. This is caused by twisted barbs that expose their flat shiny surfaces, resulting in a reflection of light from the underlying pigments. This phenomenon is found, for



Above: structural blue in combination with yellow psittacin gives bright green colours in parrots, as shown in these Ring-necked Parakeets. The top specimen has an inheritable absence of psittacin, the middle an inheritable absence of all melanin, while the bottom bird has wild-type coloration. The aberrant colours commonly occur in captive birds, but are far rarer in the abundant feral population in Britain (see also *Birdwatch* 276: 84).

Below: Brehm's Tiger Parrot from the highlands of Papua New Guinea is one of many examples in the parrot family showing how subtle variations in feather structure can change the hue of greens, while the pigment psittacin adds flashes of yellow and orange to the neck and undertail.



HEIN VAN GROEN (NHM LONDON)

STUART ELSOM



The vivid, iridescent blues of Kingfisher are controlled by detailed feather structure and the presence of black melanin in the medulla of individual barb cells. The orange underparts are mostly due to the presence of carotenoids and not psittacins, which are unique to parrots.

example, in Indian Peafowl, Mallard, Starling, Magpie and, of course, hummingbirds.

Feathers make the bird

Contour feathers give birds their aerodynamic shape and enable them to fly. In domesticated birds, for example pigeons, feather mutations appeared during domestication. These mutations effect the bird's shape and its ability to fly. Mutations include extra feathers on the feet or tail, 'obstinate' feathers which grow in the opposite direction to form crests or a breast frill, as well as curly and 'hairy' feathers. These traits are not beneficial to the bird, but were kept through domestication because humans considered them to be beautiful.

However, the same has happened naturally during evolution in the avian world; strangely shaped and often brightly coloured feathers were developed and actively selected for by the opposite sex for being 'beautiful'. In these cases it was related to reproduction, though the result is the same: oddly shaped feathers that reduce flight capabilities.

'Ornamental' feathers are altered in shape from their original purpose and used for impressing individuals of the same species. They are always contour feathers and are found in many bird species. Well-known examples are birds-of-paradise, peafowl and other pheasants. Ornamental feathers are often quite deceptive. For example, the long 'tail' of the male Indian Peafowl is in fact its uppertail coverts. These feathers can reach a length of more than 150 cm, while its real tail is no longer than 70 cm. The 'tail' of the Great Argus pheasant is formed mainly by wing feathers. Its two central tail feathers are indeed very long, about 120 cm, but the volume of the 'tail' is formed by extra-long tertials and secondaries, which are wing feathers. Finally, the hairy yellow 'tail feathers' of Greater Bird-of-paradise are in fact flank feathers.

The structure of feathers is simple as well as brilliant. They come in all shapes and sizes but they all utilise the same basic structure. They also come in a wide range of colours derived from pigments, selective light reflection due to the structure of the feather (structural colour), or a combination of the two. The different shapes, sizes and colours together allow an almost limitless diversity in plumages and it is thanks to this basic thing, the feather, that there is such diversity in bird species. ■

TYPES OF FEATHERS



WIM WILMERS (WWWAGAMI.NL)

KELLAR WILSON (WWW.FLICKR.COM)

Contour feathers are characterised by having vanes and include the flight, tail and body feathers. They enable birds to fly and give the body its aerodynamic shape.

Down feathers and **semiplumes** have a loose, fluffy texture, instead of the firm, interlocking vane structure characteristic of contour feathers. Down has no shaft or a very soft one, the barbs are very flexible and the barbules are degenerated. Down is usually short compared to contour feathers. Some, however, are quite long with a shaft and have a downy structure throughout. These are called semiplumes. There is an intergradation between semiplumes and contour body feathers, depending on the size of the downy part. Down and semiplumes are for insulating the body and maintaining its temperature.

Powder down feathers are down that disintegrates to produce a fine powder. The powder is used for cleaning the feathers and makes them water and dirt proof. Not all bird species have powder down but, for example, pigeons and herons do.

Bristles can be best described as contour feathers which lack barbs in their distal portion, so the shaft is the dominant feature. The main role of bristles is to protect soft body parts like nostrils and eyes (eyelashes).

Filoplumes are the most aberrant feather type. They have a hair-like structure: a long, thin shaft and, at the tip, a short tuft of barbs. Filoplumes are always situated next to contour feathers, due to their function as sensors of the movements of the larger feathers. If, for example, the position of a tail feather is changed by the wind, the feather may displace the tips of the filoplumes as well. They then transmit this displacement to their bases, where nerve endings register it so that the bird can reorganise its feathers. ■

Highways in the SKY

Laurent Godel was fascinated by the swifts in his home town of Barcelona, and here tells the story of how he managed to film and photograph their airborne trails in a revealing and beautiful way.

ALL PHOTOS: LAURENT GODEL

Two years ago, I wanted a pretext to go back to 'old school' (non-digital) photography. I had a full lab kit and needed a reason to buy negatives, emulsion paper and chemicals, and start again an activity that I had enjoyed very much in my youth: black-and-white photo developing.

Swifts had always fascinated me – not just their graceful flight but also that they indicate the return of warm weather. I figured that if I could manage to shoot these birds with very low shutter speeds in broad daylight, their paths would leave a revealing grey trail on the resulting image.

I bought the least light-sensitive film I could find, a very expensive filter to reduce the light coming into the

diaphragm and achieve five-second exposure times, and a tripod. I then took some test shots but nothing showed on the image – it was as if the birds had never crossed the sky!

I switched to a digital camera, but my Canon G12 did not allow for shutter openings longer than one second and it was a nightmare to adapt a filter. The only solution was to shoot rapid-fire pictures, but the six images per second that I could achieve with the G12 did not produce the desired result. I gave up.

A few days later it occurred to me that I could shoot video footage at 24 frames per second (FPS). I shot a one-minute-long film from my office balcony and was lucky enough that some swifts did indeed cross the sky at

that moment. I immediately processed the video file and I had a convincing result.

I was so happy that I completely forgot about my chemicals and negatives, and started shooting videos every morning for the rest of that summer. The G12 took decent quality video footage, and I was more than happy with the results in black and white. Then last year I bought a video camera that could shoot full HD resolution film at up to 50 FPS. That allowed me to switch to colour when it suited.

I have noticed that there are always two or more (mostly Common) swifts flying together. They rarely fly alone, especially at the beginning of the warm season; I suppose this is



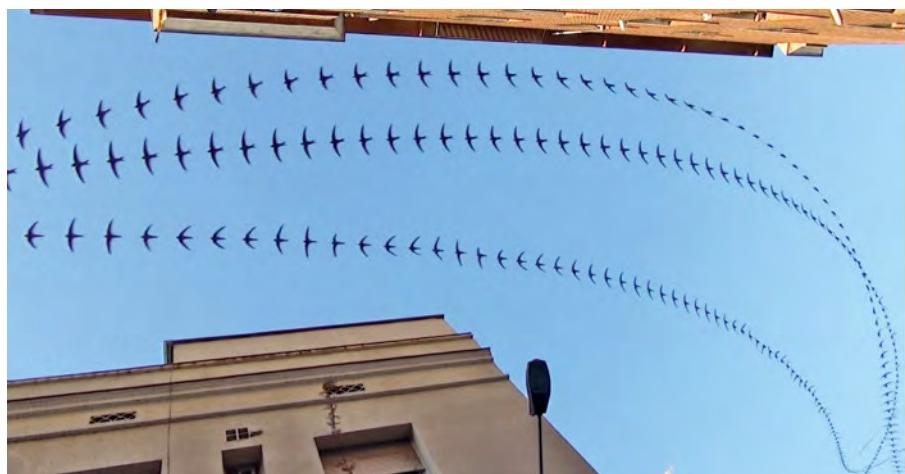
The distinctive architecture of Gaudi gives the location of Barcelona away in Laurent Godel's striking video still of two Common Swifts whizzing past in the evening light. The birds seem to use the same routes and make similar aerial patterns every day, perhaps following invisible eddies and air convection currents, or possibly being funnelled between buildings and alleys by the structures themselves and the heat reflected off their surfaces; maybe their pathways even indicate controlling factors and influences that we can't detect as terrestrial mammals.



because they are mating.

I have observed a pattern where groups of swifts fly silently high over the buildings, and then periodically dive into a frenetic dogfight-style flight that gets them rushing in between the buildings, as they emit their characteristic chattering call. Usually, they will then circle around a building and fly again through the same location up to four or five times.

The more I learn about swifts the more they fascinate me. Their extremely long migrations and the fact that they live completely in the air and only land when nesting make them remarkable animals. I've tried the same technique with pigeons, gulls and other birds, but none are as graceful as the swifts. ■



Above: Laurent says that from his observations his local swifts appear to travel in tandem with each other in pairs or more, and that images like this do not show one bird following a similar circuit, but two or more flying next to each other. **Top:** swifts are certainly gregarious, but it is not always possible to know whether the pairs they sometimes seem to fly in are actually breeding-bonded birds, or whether they are temporary companions chosen by chance.



BRIAN E SMALL (WWW.NATUREPHOTOGRAPHERS.CO.UK)

A northerly species that usually winters in Canada and northern Eurasia, Snowy Owl is a rare winter visitor to Britain, often in the hard-to-access areas of Cairngorm, Shetland and the Outer Hebrides.

Outside the breeding season, many birds are on the move. In Britain and Ireland alone, around 15 million migrant birds arrive here each spring, and maybe three times that number head south to warmer climes in autumn. In addition, others undertake local dispersal from their breeding territories, or arrive here to escape harsh northern winters or lack of food. These mass movements are not unique to Britain and Ireland: the same processes are happening right across the northern hemisphere.

For a variety of reasons, during these movements some birds are adversely affected by the weather and become 'lost': carried further than intended by strong winds, 'drifted' off course by persistent airflows or caught up in a disorientating storm. As a result, unexpected birds sometimes turn up in Britain and Ireland.

Arrivals from North America

In autumn, many North American (Nearctic) migrant landbirds fly

directly across the Gulf of Mexico from temperate-latitude breeding grounds to wintering sites in South America. Inevitably, some are caught up in Atlantic storms, low-pressure systems racing across the ocean towards our shores. Undoubtedly most of these birds perish at sea, but a few survive to make landfall in Europe. They will have travelled more than 3,000 miles and it may have taken just two or three days to get here if it was a fast-moving weather system. More than 700 individual North American landbirds have been found on this side of the Atlantic since 1958, and unsurprisingly most are recorded in October.

North American waders reach Britain and Ireland in far greater numbers than landbirds, again mostly in autumn but with a few records in spring; their arrival usually coincides with Atlantic storms.

Although most Nearctic landbirds that reach our shores probably do not survive the winter, waders fare a lot better: a few overwinter but most resume their southward journey, albeit

Wind-blown wanderers

This exclusive extract from the new **Collins BTO Guide to Rare British Birds** looks at how different weather conditions bring vagrant birds to our shores from all over the world.

on the wrong side of the Atlantic, after a spell of rest and recuperation. The following spring, some of these birds pass through Britain and Ireland as they make their way north once again.

Arrivals from Asia

Situated on the western edge the Eurasian landmass, Britain and Ireland are a natural flyway for migrant birds from northern Europe heading south. But vagrant birds from further east – as far away as Siberia and eastern Asia – also turn up on a regular basis. These are birds that should be wintering in India and South-East Asia: species such as the diminutive Yellow-browed Warbler which weighs just 6 g and breeds no closer than the Ural Mountains, some 2,500 miles from Britain.

The peak month for arrival for most Asian vagrants is October, a time when the prevailing weather normally comes from the west. However, occasionally a high-pressure anticyclone becomes established over Scandinavia, drawing



European Bee-eater is a classic spring overshoot. It has successfully bred in Britain for two years running now – will it become part of our avifauna?

Black-headed Bunting is another spring overshoot, arriving here in late spring from its breeding grounds in south-east Europe, and singing males have been observed in Britain.



an easterly flow of air all the way from Siberia. When these conditions prevail, birders can expect an influx of interesting easterly species; predictably, the east coast of Britain receives the lion's share of vagrants from Asia.

While autumn is the peak season for Far Eastern vagrants to turn up in Britain and Ireland, a few are seen each spring as well. These may well be birds that have overwintered successfully in the Western Palearctic and are making their way north at the onset of the breeding season; whether or not they reach their distant nesting grounds is unknown.

Arrivals from the south

Every spring, birds that ordinarily breed in southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin are recorded in Britain and Ireland. Their occurrence and numbers are linked to classic weather conditions that assist their journeys.

Almost all of the southern species that occur here are migrants that will have spent the winter in Africa, and those that turn up in spring are heading back to their breeding grounds. Irrespective of the weather, each year a few fail to 'switch off' their migration and 'overshoot' all the way north to Britain. Classic overshooting migrants include Hoopoe, European Bee-eater and Purple Heron. In some years their

northward migration coincides with a prolonged spell of warm southerly airflow, all the way from the Sahara; these conditions usually result in more southern migrating birds reaching our shores than usual.

Some of these species may well be pioneers looking for the opportunity to extend the northern boundary of their breeding range. A case in point is Little Egret: once a great rarity here, it is now a British breeding bird and treated as a 'common' species. Perhaps an indication of climate change, Purple Heron and Great Egret have also bred in Britain, although they have yet to become established.

In most years, spring also sees the arrival of birds that should be breeding

BIRD OBSERVATORIES AND RARE BIRDS

Fair Isle Bird Observatory has added an incredible 26 new species to the British list, including this Chestnut-eared Bunting in October 2004.



THERE are 19 accredited bird observatories around the coasts of Britain, Ireland and the Isle of Man. They are all strategically located on migration flyways so that observers can monitor and record bird migration events as they happen. The first bird observatory in Britain was set up in 1933 on the Welsh island of Skokholm and, after a period of closure, it is operational again today.

Long-term datasets of bird observations, some stretching back for many decades, are the foundation that bird observatories stand on. As well as providing information about common species, observatories have taught us a lot about the occurrence of rare and scarce migrants, and the weather conditions that are a prelude to their arrival on our shores.

Many 'firsts' for Britain have been found by observatory staff. Fair Isle is top of the league with 26 firsts at the time of writing – from Red-rumped Swallow, discovered there in June 1905, to the Chestnut-eared Bunting found in October 2004. □

in south-eastern and eastern Europe. High pressure over northern and central Europe and the resulting warm easterly airflow produce the ideal conditions for birds such as Red-footed Falcon, Bluethroat and Black-headed Bunting to be pushed west of their normal migratory route and across the North Sea.

Arrivals from the north

As our summer visitors depart in autumn for a warmer climate further south, non-breeding visitors begin to arrive to take advantage of the relatively balmy weather that a British winter has to offer. In autumn, hundreds of thousands of thrushes, small passerines and wildfowl begin to arrive; occasionally, vagrant species are associated with these mass migrations.

As winter progresses and temperatures plummet in northern Europe, we sometimes experience cold weather movements of birds: species that under normal circumstances do not stray far in winter. It is during these conditions that vagrants such as Snowy Owl and Arctic Redpoll are likely to turn up. In some years a widespread seed crop failure forces other bird species to move rather than starve; occasionally we get a crossbill invasion from mainland Europe, and sometimes flocks of Common Crossbills include Two-barred and Parrot Crossbills as well.

Seabirds

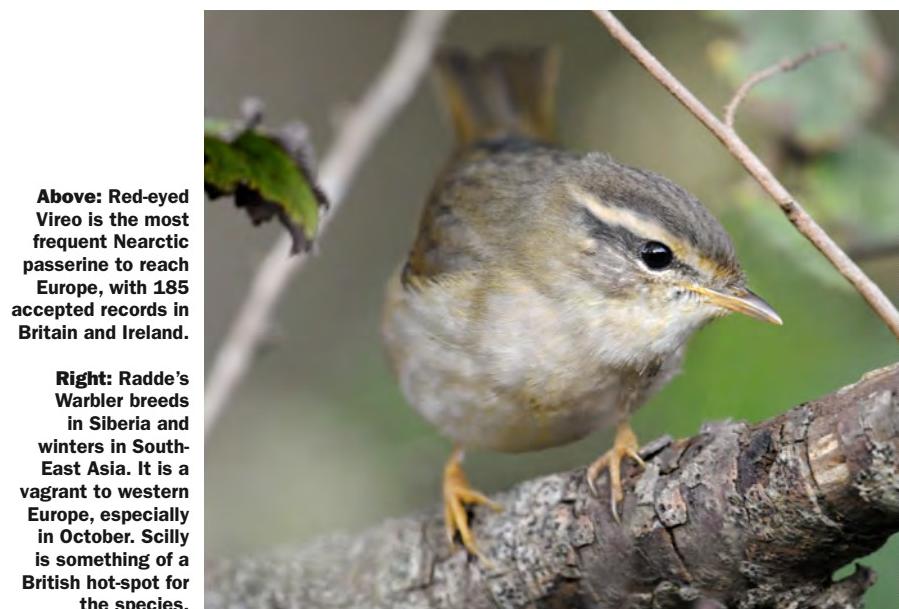
For many of us, contact with seabirds comes during the summer months when they visit our shores to breed. Until recently, little was known about their movements outside the mating season. Small insights have related mainly to 'common' British birds: for example, an Arctic Tern that was ringed on Anglesey, North Wales, was subsequently found in Australia, 11,220 miles from its ringing site. But with advances in technology and the development of small tracking devices, the migration routes and wintering areas of other seabirds are gradually being uncovered.

Most seabirds are consummate fliers, so it is no surprise to discover that they cover huge distances throughout the year. The fact that Cory's and Balearic Shearwaters visit us from Mediterranean latitudes is impressive, but most people are amazed to discover that we are also visited by birds that breed on isolated islands in the South Atlantic. Sooty and Great Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-petrels

“Most of these birds perish at sea, but a few survive to make landfall in Europe; they will have travelled more than 3,000 miles”



BRIAN E SMALL (WWW.NATUREPHOTOGRAPHERS.CO.UK)



PAUL STERRY (WWW.NATUREPHOTOGRAPHERS.CO.UK)

Above: Red-eyed Vireo is the most frequent Nearctic passerine to reach Europe, with 185 accepted records in Britain and Ireland.

Right: Radde's Warbler breeds in Siberia and winters in South-East Asia. It is a vagrant to western Europe, especially in October. Scilly is something of a British hot-spot for the species.

THE BTO'S ROLE

THE British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) primary role as a nature conservation charity relates to bird species that occur regularly in Britain; its remit does not specifically embrace scarce or rare vagrant species in our region. However, BirdTrack – the scheme that helps monitor bird movements into, out of and around Britain and Ireland – collects data on all species whether they are common, scarce or rare. This data is useful in gauging the extent of an influx of, for example, crossbills or white-winged gull species; their arrival and location can alert observers to the potential for finding even rarer species.

Bird ringing also has an important role to play, in part complementing the data collected by BirdTrack but also in the advancement of identification criteria. Features that help to separate difficult species are often first identified by ringers examining birds in the hand. ■



MICK SOUTHcott. INSET: PAUL STERRY (WWW.NATUREPHOTOGRAPHERS.CO.UK)



circumnavigate the North Atlantic during their winter (our summer). By July or August they have reached our quadrant of the North Atlantic and are making their way back to their southern ocean breeding grounds. Usually the birds pass offshore and out of the sight of land-based birders, but during strong onshore winds they are seen occasionally from Atlantic-facing headlands.

In autumn, Atlantic storms force other migrating seabirds close to land-based observers: birds moving south from Arctic breeding grounds. Along with more regularly encountered species such as Sabine's Gull, Grey Phalarope, skuas and Leach's Storm-petrels, there is always a chance of some unusual species being spotted. ■

Main photo: outside the breeding season, Wilson's Storm-petrel spends all its time at sea, travelling from the coasts of Antarctica to the North Atlantic, where it can be seen from pelagic trips off Scilly.

Inset: sometimes hundreds of Yellow-browed Warblers arrive in Britain and Ireland from the east in autumn. In Shetland, this diminutive bird can be the most numerous warbler on the islands during September and October.

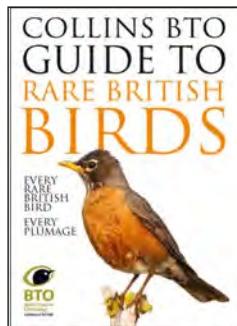
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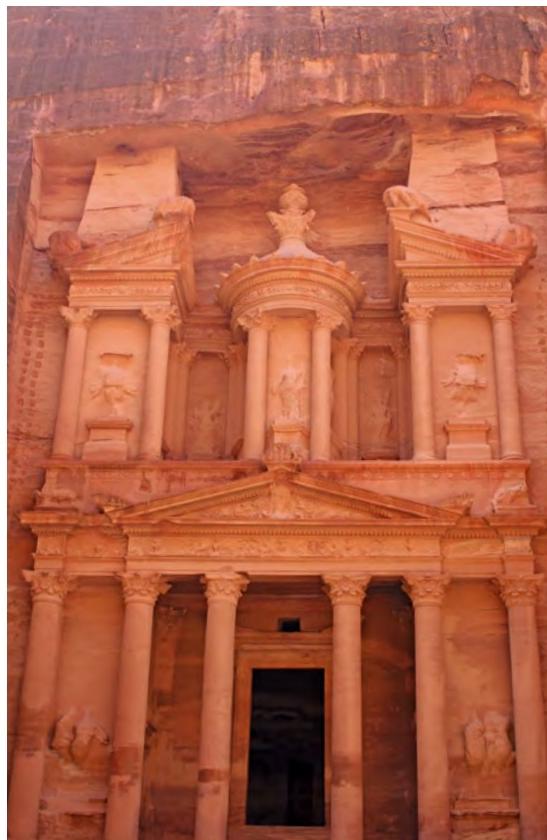
Vast deserts, impressive wadis and migrant traps with untapped potential all add up to a first-class birding destination. **Dominic Mitchell** visits Jordan and finds a unique blend of birds and cultural heritage.

DANIELE OCCHIAIO (WWW.AGAMIN.NL)



From my vantage point high on the rim of a dramatic canyon, the view is both spectacular and scary. You can see for miles across a wild and barren panorama of limestone and granite to the west, but right now it's the sheer drop below that firmly has my attention. I've never been a great one for heights, but I'm looking down because a flash of black and white at the foot of the cliff demands scrutiny. I raise my bins carefully, focus and a handsome male Eastern Black-eared Wheatear resolves into sharp relief.

As I watch it, a harsh, grating call emanating from a hiding place in the scrub echoes around the wadi, and Chukar Partridge unwittingly adds itself to the trip list. The contrasting sound of whistled calls from behind announces the arrival of a group of boisterous Tristram's Starlings, and I turn and watch them playing on the roof of our guesthouse, musing that they've probably only come to see if I've got any scraps to give away. Meanwhile, the unmistakable call of a Common Cuckoo begins all to chime metronomically in the background.



Hewn out of the sandstone rock, the Treasury, or Al Khazneh (above), is one of the most elaborate temples in the ancient city of Petra. Stunning pink male Sinai Rosefinches (top) were surprisingly well camouflaged amid the rose-coloured rock, and often perched on the buildings themselves.

ALL PHOTOS: DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM) UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED

Morning glory

This is daybreak at Dana, a village nestled at the head of a remarkable geological formation, its ageing stone dwellings toning into the landscape as if they were an extension of the crags on which they balance. On a slope just south of the village, we discover that scattered junipers hold the main avian prize here: Syrian Serin, a species searched for unsuccessfully the previous day but now on show in numbers right on our doorstep. This attractive finch has one of the most restricted distributions of any Western Palearctic bird, and with its eponymous Arab republic now firmly off limits, Jordan may well be the best place to see it.

After sating ourselves with views, further exploration of this birdy area produces Pale Crag Martins, migrant Cretzschmar's Buntings, *Common Redstarts* and, surprising us so far south, even a couple of Hawfinches. Further afield in the spectacular Dana Biosphere Reserve, soaring Bonelli's and Short-toed Eagles distract us as we stake out a vulture feeding station, while three owl species include a calling Pharaoh Eagle



Exhausted migrants such as this eye-catching Cretzschmar's Bunting could be found almost anywhere in spring.

“We even saw a singing male on the Treasury, the building made famous in the Hollywood film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*”

Owl, but not the hoped-for Hume's – one to try for next time, perhaps.

A two-night stay is barely enough time to sample the natural delights of Wadi Dana, but even greater wonders await us to the south. The site of the ancient Nabataean city of Petra, half built and half carved into red sandstone cliffs, occupies a vast area spread over almost 100 square miles. The 'Rose

City' was first inhabited in prehistoric times and is remarkably well preserved, despite issues with erosion. It also doubles as one of the most unusual birding spots I have ever visited.

Petra can be explored on horseback but we walked in on foot through the Siq, a mile-long gorge just 3 m wide at its narrowest but enclosed by cliffs up to 180 m high. It was here that we found my



Possibly established as long ago as 312 BC, Petra is a World Heritage Site and the most-visited tourist attraction in Jordan. It is also home to a variety of breeding birds and a good area from which to see raptor passage during migration times.

most-wanted target bird, Sinai Rosefinch, the beautiful pink males surprisingly well camouflaged in their sandstone surroundings. Another Western Palearctic endemic and also Jordan's national bird, this species is probably nowhere easier to see than at Petra; we even saw a singing male perched on the Treasury, the building made famous to many in the Hollywood blockbuster *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Careful searching of this UNESCO World Heritage site can produce other species, too. Some visitors attending night-time events here have had luck with Hume's Owl, but for a second time we tried and dipped. We did, however, find Mourning Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and a passage of raptors which included Short-toed Eagle, Steppe Buzzard and Lesser Kestrel. Birds were clearly on the move, something we were to witness on an impressive scale when our southward journey culminated at the bottleneck that is Aqaba.

Migration en masse

At the head of the Red Sea, Aqaba lies at a continental crossroads and is perfectly placed for observing migration. Countless millions of birds pour northwards here each spring from their African winter quarters to breeding grounds in eastern Europe and western Asia. Our visit was in mid-March, pretty much at the height of spring passage, and it was every bit as good as we'd hoped.

In hot-spots such as this, you don't have to look far for migrants – they are everywhere, feeding or resting after a long journey from the south. We walked through the market gardens along the sea-front promenade, and they were crawling with birds. One small cress bed had at least 20 ground-feeding Common Chiffchaffs, while Tree Pipits buzzed and flushed left, right and centre, and a colourful array of *flava* wagtails, including variant Black-headed with bold eyebrows, chased unseen insect prey.

Pulses really started racing when I glimpsed a smart black-and-white flycatcher sally off the top of a palm stump: male Semicollared, a welcome lifer for some in the group. Further on, a movement close to the path brought us to an instant standstill, and a gorgeous male Cretzschmar's Bunting sat up in the open in the late afternoon light, totally unconcerned as we admired every detail of its blue-and-orange plumage from just feet away. We would have been happy enough with that haul for a short walk, but a handsome male

Masked Shrike ensured that our cake had been well and truly iced.

There's plenty more to see away from the centre of this busy resort, and we drove south towards the Saudi Arabian border to explore the Red Sea coast. White-eyed Gulls were numerous here and distinctive, unlike some of the other larids loafing in the scorching Middle Eastern sun. Caspian Gull was common and easy to pick out, but the other gulls took longer as we worked through a range of less familiar species of various ages and in assorted stages of wear and moult. There were Armenian and Baltic Gulls for sure, and possibly Heuglin's too; I even wondered about Steppe Gull, the *barabensis* form which is abundant in some parts of the Middle East but supposedly unknown in Jordan. So many gulls, too little time ...

Moving on

We also visited Aqaba's own bird observatory and its adjacent complex of saltpans, racking up more ticks for the trip list. I would have loved to stay longer in this productive area, but with the vast Wadi Araba and dramatic Dead Sea still to take in on our way back to the capital, Amman, time was not on our side. Reluctantly, we headed north up the Rift Valley, birding en route.

At first glance this vast, open desert landscape might seem birdless, but



Syrian Serin is classified as Vulnerable due to its small population which is thought to be declining at key sites. With its eponymous Arab republic firmly off limits, Jordan represents one of the few places to see this highly range-restricted species.

don't believe it. Roadside Blackstarts, Desert Larks and Southern Grey Shrikes, migrant Eastern Bonelli's Warblers 'chipping' from withered acacias, Green Bee-eaters flashing colours on the wing – there was no shortage of avian

diversions. Some were more abrupt than others, our bus shuddering to repeated halts with every cry of "Raptor!" as the likes of Steppe and Eastern Imperial Eagles drifted overhead on their own northward journeys.

In the extraordinary setting of the Dead Sea, at 1,400 ft below sea level the Earth's lowest elevation on land, we were still logging migrating birds of prey heading up the Rift Valley as daylight faded.

Perhaps unwisely, I passed over the opportunity to float in the sea's fabled mineral-rich waters in favour of one last birding session, enjoying



Jordan may have extensive areas of sand desert, but the natural gorge of Wadi Dana, overlooked by Dana village, is a carpet of grasses and flowers during spring. Unsurprisingly, this stunning habitat attracts a wide range of exciting birds.



On a major migration route between Eurasian breeding grounds and African winter quarters, Jordan boasts huge numbers of passage migrants. Species such as Wryneck, scarce in western Europe, are often encountered.

close-up views of Fan-tailed Raven – something of a speciality here – and other species. All too soon the next morning it was time to head to the airport.

It was there that we had our only awkward encounter of the trip, with over-cautious security staff quizzing us about the profusion of lenses and optics in our hand luggage. It was unnecessary, but perhaps unsurprising in a country where birding is something of a novelty. That will surely change as Jordan's outstanding potential becomes better

known and birding tourists a more familiar sight. Otherwise, there were no security issues whatsoever, and we were made welcome and greeted with a smile everywhere we went. Jordan left me with many happy memories, but also with unfinished business on owls and gulls – all the more reason to return. ■

FURTHER INFO

Visiting

- Several specialist companies run organised tours to Jordan, and independent travel is also possible. For more information on visiting the country and planning your trip, see the Jordan Tourism Board website at www.visitjordan.com and the specific Eco and Nature section at <http://uk.visitjordan.com/Whattodo/EcoNature.aspx>. Email enquiries should be sent to info@visitjordan.com.
- Spring is the best time for visiting birders, with spectacular northbound migration from late February to early May and resident and breeding specialities on territory. Autumn passage should also be excellent, while in the cooler months winter visitors include wildfowl, raptors, Common Crane, Armenian and Great Black-headed Gulls and Finsch's Wheatear.

Further reading

- *Birds of the Middle East* by Richard Porter and Simon Aspinall (second edition, Christopher Helm, from £22.99 (SRP £29.99)) bit.ly/bw279BirdsMiddleEast.
- *Birds of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan* by Ian Andrews (Hobby Publishing – now out of print but may be available secondhand).
- *The State of Jordan's Birds 2013* is an excellent free-to-access overview of birds, habitats and conservation in the country – download at www.birdlife.org/datazone/userfiles/file/sowb/countries/SOJB_final.pdf.pdf.

Online resources

- Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature is the BirdLife International Partner in Jordan: www.rscn.org.jo.
- Avibase's checklist (IOC taxonomy) of all bird species recorded in Jordan: bit.ly/JordanIOCbirdlist.





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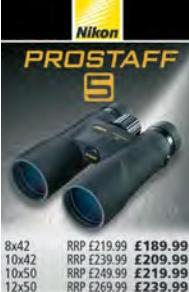
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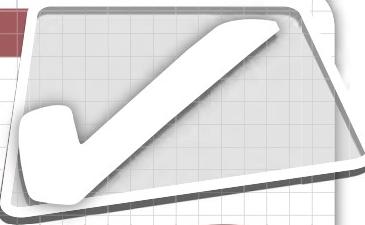
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EXPERT REVIEWS



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Highs and lows

High in magnification and low in weight, US optics manufacturer Celestron's stock-in-trade TrailSeeker binoculars provide a good budget option, says **Mike Alibone**.

REVIEW

Celestron TrailSeeker 10x32 binocular

AMERICAN optics giant Celestron is currently strengthening its presence on this side of the Atlantic, having opened a new distribution centre in Thatcham, Berkshire, and announcing in June a new business development initiative to "support rapid expansion in the UK".

Its binocular range comprises entry-level models extending to mid-field reach, with the TrailSeekers positioned immediately below the brand's flagship Granite series. Like many of today's optics, they originate in China, have a relatively low price point and appear to be very well constructed. Buyers have a choice of 8x and 10x magnification and 32 mm or 42 mm objectives.

Willing to sacrifice a modicum of image brightness, I have always favoured 10x magnification over 8x, so I opted to test the 10x32, which in this instance combines maximum magnification with low weight and compactness. At a mere 453 g and combined with an extensive, padded neckstrap, this binocular sits very comfortably around the neck to the extent that its presence is almost unnoticeable.

The simple design format comprises a very light magnesium alloy chassis overlaid with lightly textured, non-slip rubber armour

which curls generously around the objective housings, lending a reasonable degree of protection. Inset on the underside are two

shallow elliptical cutaways, perfectly positioned obliquely for your thumbs. Although the strap attachment lugs are partly

inset, I still found they dug a little into the skin between my thumb and forefinger as a result of their positioning relative to the focusing wheel.

The dioptre adjustment is mounted on the right ocular and



72 September's photo challenge

The one you've all been waiting for! This month, Steve Young wants to see your best photos of Puffins.

73 Recognising bird song

A new Android app will help you identify songs and calls from 60 of Britain's best-known garden birds.

74 Not so glorious

Mark Avery's latest book takes aim at the grouse shooting industry.

75 Portuguese birding

A new site guide covering Portugal and its islands as well as a bird report for the Azores.

76 For the love of butterflies

A readable and interesting memoir from butterfly enthusiast Matthew Oates.

76 Doves from above

A comprehensive new monograph covers all the pigeons and doves of Australia.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



DOMINIC MITCHELL is Birdwatch's founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.



MIKE ALBONE is Birdwatch's Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.



STEVE YOUNG is Photographic Consultant for Birdwatch and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



DAVID CALLAHAN Prior to joining Birdwatch, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



REBECCA ARMSTRONG has been working for Birdwatch for seven years and is a self-confessed app junkie.



CHARLIE MOORES is a birder with more than 40 years' experience, as well as a writer on conservation issues.

Did you know?

BINOCULAR harnesses or 'suspenders' have become a popular alternative to conventional neckstraps in recent years as they considerably reduce neck strain by spreading the binocular's weight distribution evenly across your shoulders and torso.

is accessible to operate with or without the eyecup extended. Made of metal and deeply notched, it turns smoothly and sports an obvious raised node, which serves to indicate the user setting either side of a simple +/- zero point. Above this, the rubber-covered metal eyecups give the impression of being sturdy and durable; they twist outwards, click-stopping at base, fully extended and one intermediate position. The rubber covering is firm but comfortable against the eye.

The central focusing wheel is a little more than one finger's width. It is rubber covered and widely ribbed, with approximately one and a half smooth anti-clockwise turns taking the image from its closest focus at 2.5 m to infinity. In testing, I found I could actually focus on objects as close as 2.1 m. The 108 m field of view is about average for this binocular's specification.

I did find a slight softening of the image in approximately 20 per cent of the field's periphery, and there is also an element of field curvature evident. This does not, however, constitute a major issue under general viewing conditions and the image is otherwise sharp.

Given the small objective and high magnification, the image is perhaps rather brighter than I would have expected, even in dull conditions. Fully multi-coated glass surfaces and dielectric prism coatings no doubt contribute to this, as well

as helping to deliver a good degree of contrast, along with rich, natural colours. There is a measure of chromatic aberration, variable in intensity across the field, which is more evident in brighter light conditions, but this is borderline in terms of acceptance. It did not detract from my birding experience in either woodland or wetland habitats.

It's worth noting this is one of a small number of binoculars on the market with which a shoulder harness or 'suspender' is supplied as standard, along with the more conventional neckstrap. Additionally there are stay-on objective lens covers which fit fairly loosely, prompting me to advise not keeping them attached in the field. The whole package fits neatly into a soft, padded nylon and leatherette carry-case, with an additional pocket for a lens cloth and other small items. ■

Further info

- **Price:** £235
- **Size:** 123x122 mm
- **Weight:** 453 g
- **Field of view:** 108 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** not available
- **Close focus:** 2.5 m
- **Gas-filled:** yes
- **Waterproof:** yes
- **Guarantee:** limited lifetime

Verdict

- ✓ Image bright even in dull conditions
- ✓ Good contrast and natural colours
- ✗ Some chromatic aberration

PRODUCT NEWS

Swarovski Optik PA-i6 digiscoping adapter and EL range FieldPro package



SWAROVSKI OPTIK has become synonymous with digiscoping. The company's Digiscoper of the Year competition has celebrated the best of the craft for a decade and it has produced innovative products to help digiscopers improve their technique.

The latest addition to this range is the PA-i6 digiscoping adapter. Specially designed to fit the iPhone

6, the product easily attaches to a Swarovski spotting scope or binocular, converting it into a powerful telephoto lens which allows you to take close-up images of wildlife. The adapter is available now. See the *Decade of Digiscoping* supplement free with this issue for tips and inspiration on how to improve your digiscoping.

The company has also made several improvements to the design of its market-leading EL binoculars. The range, which has 32, 42 and 50 mm options, will be available from September. See *Birdwatch* 278: 70-71 for a full review of the improvements and accessories. ■

MORE INFO Price: varies; see the website for details. Contact: 0800 3242 5056 or visit www.swarovskioptik.com.

Powertraveller Crankmonkey

WHAT could be more frustrating than trying to check an ID call on your mobile app only to find your smartphone battery has run out of juice? This new product from Powertraveller could be just the answer.



The Crankmonkey is a portable charger for a range of devices. Uniquely, it generates power independently of mains electricity or batteries simply by rotating the handle. It can generate enough power to switch on a smartphone and make a call in just two minutes, while 10 minutes of winding the handle – or 'cranking' – can provide up to 20 minutes of talktime on an iPhone 6. ■

MORE INFO Price: £149.99. Contact: call 01793 615836 or visit www.kenro.co.uk.

STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

Puffin



THIS month's challenge is the one you have all been waiting for! I want to see your best photos of one of our favourite subjects: the perennially popular Puffin.

Some of you will have visited a seabird colony this summer, or at some point in recent years. Maybe the Farne Islands in Northumberland were on your travel list or East Yorkshire's Bempton Cliffs RSPB tempted you, or perhaps you headed to such harder-to-reach spots as Shetland or Skomer for a holiday. Wherever you might have been, I want to see all those great Puffin shots that you took – flying, feeding, close-up portraits, groups and anything else that's been seen through the lens.

Puffins can make a rather easy subject, so I'll be looking for something really eyecatching to take this month's prize, a copy of *Seabirds* by Marianne Taylor. Good luck! ■

- Turn to page 93 to find out who won July's challenge.

Left: Puffins' tameness means there is always the chance of good close-up shots.

Below: a wide-angle shot can be used in certain situations, such as this image taken on Skomer as the bird leaves its nesting burrow.



Calls of the wild

REVIEW

BirdUp app

RECOGNISING bird songs and calls brings a whole new dimension to your birding. This new Android app claims to instantly identify 60 of Britain's most regular garden, park and woodland birds, helping beginners to improve their understanding of vocalisations.

It's incredibly easy to use, with a very stripped down interface. Simply open the app and it immediately goes into recording mode, utilising the phone or tablet's microphone to 'listen' to the sounds. Taking it out into my east London garden, it straight away identified the songs of both Collared Dove and Woodpigeon. As more songs and calls are recorded, it creates a list of species.

At the bottom of the screen are signal level (the loudness of the song or call) and noise level (the background sounds). Ideally you want the former to be much higher than the latter. The app offers such tips as stand still to reduce background noise and get as close to the bird as possible to increase signal. This is obviously problematic with birds, but possibly less so with garden species.

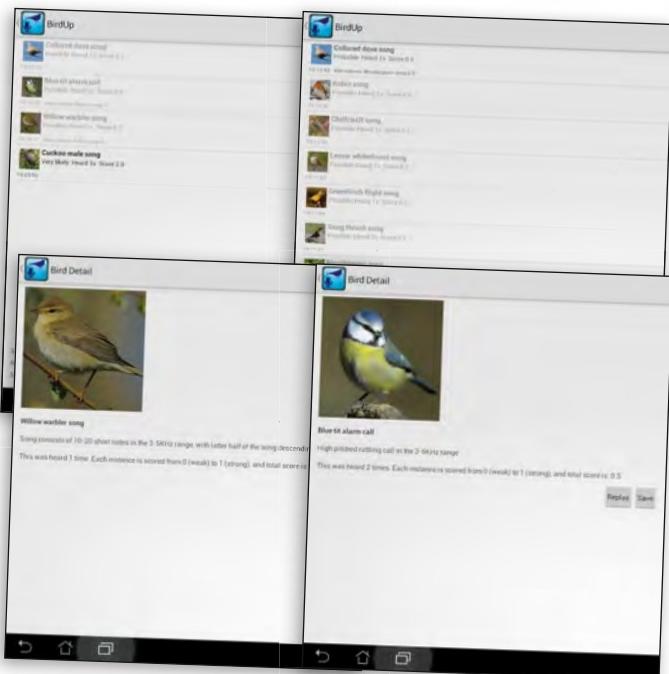
There's also a sensitivity

measure. Increasing this will increase the number of birds recognised, but is also likely to introduce more errors.

For each vocalisation the app gives alternatives and an accuracy score. This latter is a numerical rating in 10 increments between 0 (weak) and 1 (strong). BirdUp notes the number of instances a song is recorded and gives a total accuracy score based on this. A single instance of Collared Dove had a score of 1; the alternative given was Woodpigeon with an accuracy score of 0.9. Using this score, the app provides a judgement of whether the ID is 'possible', 'likely' or 'very likely'.

I wanted to further test the app, so played some snatches of different songs and calls on my phone. Starting with an easy one, I blasted out Common Cuckoo. Unsurprisingly the app accurately called it, with a score of 2 and three instances 'heard'. The judgement was 'very likely'. It also correctly identified Willow Warbler song, Blue Tit alarm call and Greenfinch flight call. These were all confirmed as 'possible'.

The app wasn't totally accurate, though. It wrongly called



Chaffinch as Greenfinch, Blackcap as Song Thrush and Common Chiffchaff as Robin, this last being particularly surprising!

Once a bird has appeared on the list, you can tap the entry to access further information and a larger photo. This is very basic, with a one-line description of the vocalisation and an explanation of the accuracy score. You can start again by tapping Options and then 'Clear list'.

The app is somewhat slow to respond and I found I had to hold my phone quite close to the tablet for the app to 'hear' the sounds. This means it's not really suitable for identifying a snatch of song while out in the field. It's also limited to just 60 species. However, for anyone new to birding wanting to learn the songs and calls of their garden birds this free app could be a good starting point. **Rebecca Armstrong**

More info From Jon Burn • Free • 3.5 MB • Requires Android 4.0.3 or later • Version 1.8 • bit.ly/bw279BirdUp

Everything you wanted to know about optics but were afraid to ask



OPTICS are undoubtedly the most expensive part of a birder's essential kit, with some high-end binoculars costing well over £1,000 and equivalent spotting scopes topping £2,000. At the very least, every birder needs bins that will suit their requirements, last a decent length of time and won't break the bank. But with so many models to choose from it can seem like an impossible decision.

Birdwatch's resident optics expert Mike Alibone has compiled the best buying advice for telescopes and

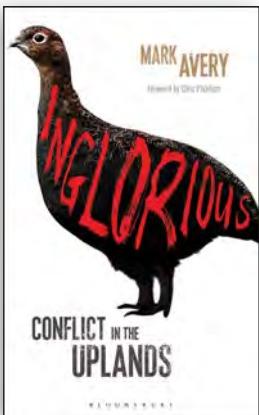
binoculars, as well as in-depth reviews of the latest products from optics manufacturers such as Leica, Kowa and Celestron and

comprehensive tables showing data for all binoculars, telescopes and tripods suitable for the birding market.

All this invaluable information will be published in a special free supplement to accompany the October issue of *Birdwatch*. So whether you're a beginner birder investing in optics for the first time or an old hand thinking of upgrading your scope, make sure you don't miss the October issue (on sale 24 September; turn to page 91 to find out more about what's in this issue). ■



Taking careful aim at the shooters



MOST people reading this review will already know that there is something of a war being fought in the English uplands. On the one side is an industry staffed and supported by wealthy landowners who sell Red Grouse to the highest bidder. On the other is an ever-growing citizen army, headed by a small group of scientists and conservationists, who are fed up with land mismanagement, wildlife crime and the assumption that a tiny minority should determine how huge swathes of our countryside should be used. Exchanges between the two sides have been intensifying, and now – targeted to coincide with yet another 12 August gunfest – comes *Inglorious: Conflict in the Uplands*.

The book is written by Dr Mark Avery, former Conservation Director at the RSPB and a key figure in the battle of the uplands, a civil war that's threatening to turn more and more uncivil as the grouse-shooting season commences. It is – if you're on one side – everything you hoped it might be: entertaining, detailed, accessible and utterly, ruthlessly logical. If you're on the other, however, it's everything you hoped it wouldn't be.

It kicks off with an excoriating foreword by Chris Packham, who takes a verbal flame-thrower to the "tiny, selfish, destructive minority who measure their pleasure in the number of things they can kill". *Inglorious* details the story of the Hen Harrier in Britain and its persecution by game interests, then takes us through the history of grouse shooting and on to the important study of Hen Harriers and grouse bags at Langholm Moor. Mark next looks at the period from the first Langholm study to the end of 2013 – years during which it became clearer that intensive grouse moor management wasn't in the public interest for reasons unconnected with Hen Harriers or birds of prey.

Chapter 5 celebrates what might be called the 'Year of the Hen Harrier', during which the

species' conservation network spread out from established NGOs and organisations to birders and the general public. This is followed by an imaginary scenario where a former gamekeeper turned wildlife guide looks back on the bad old years of persecution and demonisation of Hen Harriers. *Inglorious* wraps up with a short chapter on how to bring an end to driven grouse shooting, should the arguments presented in the book have persuaded you that there is, after all, nothing 'glorious' about raising vast numbers of birds to be blasted apart over precious habitat that increasingly resembles intensively managed farmland.

A battle plan, a manual and a thorough investigation, the book clearly and calmly explains what drew Mark to this particular fight (he isn't against shooting *per se*, incidentally), and how he reached his conclusions that driven grouse shooting is bad for the land, bad for the taxpayer, bad for the environment, and of course, bad for our birds of prey. It is well written, the language used easy going and delivered with a metaphoric twinkle in the eye that says: "Hey, this is only my opinion," while daring the reader to come up with a valid riposte.

That's some challenge, though, because more than anything *Inglorious* is intelligent and convincing, the arguments honed via decades on the frontline, a lengthy series of blog posts and readers' comments, and an unquenchable curiosity to keep on learning.

The book is honest, too. Mark acknowledges that predation by foxes hits Hen Harriers; that Hen Harriers do eat Red Grouse chicks – not enough to impact their overall populations, but sufficient to deny 'sportsmen' what they chillingly call the 'shootable surplus'; and that some moorland-breeding shorebird species do well on land managed by gamekeepers. As far as the first two points go, that's what's called 'nature'. Should we trade the burning of peat (one of the most effective carbon-storing

ecosystems on the planet), the permanent disfigurement of SSSIs and SACs with roads and shooting butts, the piles of dead Mountain Hares and Stoats, the tons of lead shot polluting soil and water, and the illegal persecution of birds of prey for a few more Eurasian Curlews and European Golden Plovers? If that's the best argument for continuing with driven grouse shooting in its current destructive form then, as this book makes clear, it's a very feeble one.

Is this book the 'death by a thousand cuts' the driven grouse industry should fear? It is a surgical dissection by a writer at the top of his game, but it's not entirely immune from criticism. There is a joke that jars and should perhaps have been edited out, and some right-of-centre commentators will undoubtedly denounce it as an attack on 'class privilege' from a Labour-supporting 'bolshie'. But it will be very, very hard to cogently defeat the arguments laid out in *Inglorious*. And as Mark himself said in a recent interview, simply "calling Mark Avery a prat" as some shooters have done isn't a counter-argument of any value whatsoever.

The author is someone you'd much prefer on your side than against you, and *Inglorious* is a remarkable book. Established 'sporting' practices have rarely been challenged like this or come under such clear-eyed scrutiny – and even more rarely in a book aimed squarely at the everyday birder and general public rather than specialists. Anyone with the slightest interest in why we're missing so many Hen Harriers from upland moorlands, and also why we're increasingly hearing concerns about the state of some of our most beautiful countryside, really should read this book. If your interest extends into involvement and activism, you will find *Inglorious* empowering. If your interest in Red Grouse is purely financial, you've clearly hacked Mark Avery off and frankly you've only yourself to blame for the consequences. **Charlie Moores**

DESTINATIONS

Birdfinders brochure 2016



BIRDFINDERS has dramatically changed the format of its annual brochure – from 328 pages last year the 2016 edition has shrunk to just 32. It still features a summary introduction to all tours including dates and prices, but with detailed itineraries now online instead – and, importantly, an annual saving of more than 1.5 tonnes of paper. Through its carbon emissions offset scheme, the company says it has raised a remarkable £38,500 for the World Land Trust.

There are four new tours for 2016: Belize and Tikal for Agami Heron, Ocellated Turkey, Orange-breasted Falcon and spectacular Mayan sites; the Pantanal, Brazil, where Jaguar stars alongside a wide range of endemics and large numbers of waterbirds; a budget Ecuador tour to a lodge which promises almost 300 species and an antpitta feeding station; and Senegal for West African specialities including the majestic Arabian Bustard.

There are also numerous departures to destinations in the Western Palearctic, Asia and North America, a south-east Australian tour and cruises in both the Arctic and Antarctic, making Birdfinders' birding coverage truly global. ■

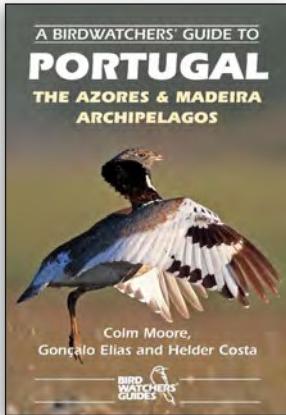
MORE INFO Price: brochure free on request. Contact: 01258 839066 or visit www.birdfinders.co.uk.

More info

- *Inglorious: Conflict in the Uplands* by Mark Avery (Bloomsbury Natural History, London, 2015).
- 304 pages, no illustrations.
- ISBN 9781472917416. Hbk, £16.99.



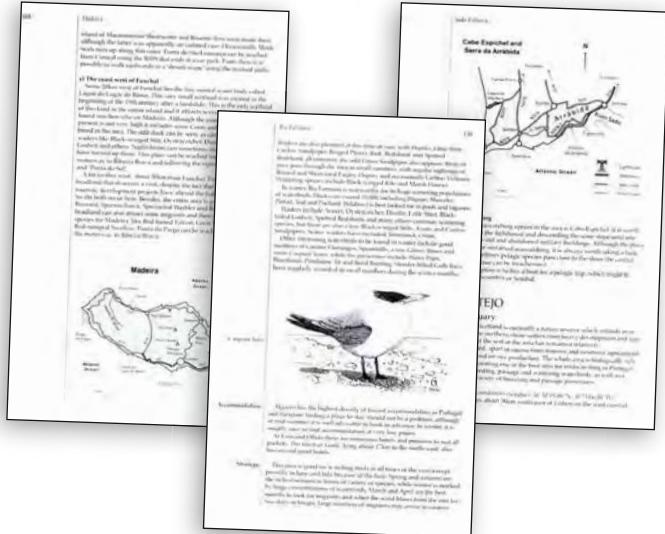
Portugal's birds fully covered



Unlike its Atlantic island groups the mainland has no endemic species. There are, however, comprehensive details and numerous maps to help find such specialities as Lesser Kestrel, Great and Little Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Red-necked Nightjar, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Western Orphean Warbler, Iberian Chiffchaff and Iberian Magpie (now split from Azure-winged, though this is not noted here).

The Azores section occupies 17 pages, with each of the nine islands and their birds covered in turn. The text gives a good overview of their avifauna and again describes areas to see the specialities, including the endemic Monteiro's Storm-petrel (now widely split despite comments to the contrary) and Azores Bullfinch. Unlike maps for the mainland, however, the scale of those used here is too small to be of practical help. Some text is also missing at the end of the entry for the island of São Jorge.

The final 10 pages of the site sections are devoted to Madeira, including Porto Santo, the Desertas and the Selvagens, an archipelago which also boasts two true endemic species – Trocaz Pigeon and Madeira Firecrest – as well as endemic breeders in the form of Zino's and Desertas Petrels. The two maps are again small and lack detail



but the text is helpful, though surprisingly there is no mention of the regular pelagics departing from the east of the island, which have recently found the at-sea feeding area of Zino's Petrel and also some remarkable rarities, including Black-bellied Storm-petrel and South Polar Skua.

The site sections are followed by selective bird lists for mainland

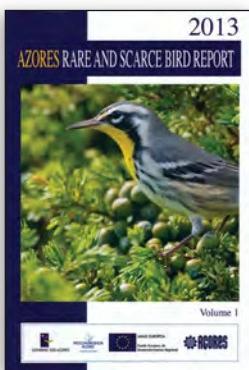
Portugal, Azores, Madeira and non-native species, as well as a full checklist with status keys and simplified lists of amphibians, reptiles and mammals. The book concludes with recommended reading suggestions and useful contacts and websites, making this a very handy overview for anyone planning to go birding in the region covered. **Dominic Mitchell**

More info

- *A Birdwatchers' Guide to Portugal, the Azores and Madeira Archipelagos* by Colm Moore, Gonçalo Elias and Helder Costa (Prion, Cley next the Sea, 2014).
- 212 pages, numerous maps and line drawings.
- ISBN 9781871104134. Pbk, £17.99.



Mid-Atlantic accent



IT'S 10 years since Hurricane Wilma brought a deluge of American vagrants to the Azores, and this Western Palearctic outpost has been firmly in the headlines ever since. There's much more to the islands than a mid-October crop of Nearctic rarities,

however, and this new annual report documents all records of notable species throughout the year.

The B5-format publication has a bold cover featuring one of 2013's star birds, Yellow-throated Warbler – new not just for the Azores but also for the Western Palearctic. More than 60 additional images scattered throughout the report depict such mouth-watering regional rarities as White-tailed Tropicbird, Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Sooty Tern, American Cliff Swallow, Cedar Waxwing, Philadelphia Vireo and Black-throated Blue Warbler.

After a review of the year by month, the main substance of the text is the accounts of 144 species – either regional and national rarities or locally scarce species, all of which have

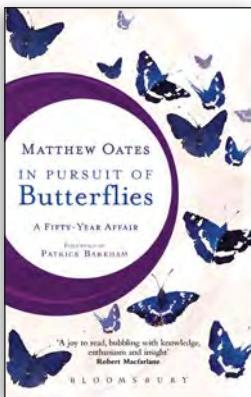
all records listed or monthly counts presented. Unsurprisingly, most of the rarer vagrants originate from North America, with reported other 'Yank' firsts including Ruby-crowned Kinglet and White-throated Sparrow, but there are also some notable Old World wanderers such as the islands' first Eleonora's Falcon and *longipes* Oystercatcher (this subspecies breeds no further west than Turkey and Ukraine). Note that all major records are subject to assessment by the national rarities committee.

There are a few minor typos and other errors, some involving dates and details of records, but they don't overly detract from this much-needed first attempt at a local report. Whether its future lies in a print edition or online downloads remains to be seen, but either way this initial Azores Bird Club publication is a welcome step in the right direction, and a foundation on which to produce even more comprehensive reports in years to come. **Dominic Mitchell**

More info

- *Azores Rare and Scarce Bird Report 2013 Volume 1 Number 1* (Azores Bird Club, 2014).
- 73 pages, 66 colour photos, numerous tables.
- Pbk, £8 plus £1.50 p&p in UK or £3.00 for Europe. To order a copy email littleoakgroup@btinternet.com.

Love of lepidoptera



COME summer, birders' thoughts often turn to butterflies. Just as birds get harder to find, these delicate and distinctly marked creatures come into their own. While birders dream of productive springs and autumns, it is the summer months for which author Matthew Oates longs.

This new book chronicles a lifetime devoted to butterflies, from boyhood collecting to adult conservation work. Much of it makes for depressing reading. Oates writes of that familiar litany of habitat destruction, agricultural intensification and declining species. It's not all bad news, though, and some butterflies are thriving. The successful introduction of Large Blue to Collard Hill, Somerset, has seen the colony grow to be second largest in Britain and one of the largest known in Europe; it has

been visited by 10,000 people.

Relying heavily on his incredibly detailed diaries, the author charts the highs and lows of butterflying summer by summer. His love for the subject is infectious, and despite the population crashes and total loss of species in some areas, it's impossible not to get caught up in his sheer enthusiasm.

Butterflies are highly reliant on the weather, and so the book faithfully logs relevant information. This makes for a fascinating – if worrying – read. Looking back over 50 years where month after month is recorded as the hottest/wettest/driest and so on, it's hard to see how anyone can deny climate change.

Oates was lucky enough – or should that be tenacious and hard working enough? – to turn his boyhood passion into a career in conservation. He now works for the National Trust and since 1992 has carried out many surveys, counts and studies of lepidoptera on NT land, contributing hugely to our understanding of lepidoptera, as well as to the conservation of several species.

The book provides a record of the changing fortunes of Britain's butterflies, as well as an insight into the life of a dedicated naturalist and the highs and lows of conservation. Interesting and engaging, this is a title that will

BOOKSHELF



Heather O'Connor announces some exciting and beneficial changes to the Birdwatch Bookshop's ordering process.

IF you follow us online at www.birdwatch.co.uk or on Twitter @BirdwatchExtra, you'll be aware that the Birdwatch Bookshop recently announced that it has a new home for placing orders for all your birding and wildlife books. This move entails an improved system to make it even easier for customers to order their 'wants', and it speeds up the process from start to finish.

You can now call our designated order line on 01778 392027, where our dedicated team are ready to take your order. Alternatively, you can still use the order form opposite to place orders, posting them to the new address: Birdwatch Bookshop, Warners Group Publications, The Maltings, West Street, Bourne PE10 9PH. If you prefer to order online, you can still continue to do so in the usual way at www.birdwatch.co.uk/store. This is also the perfect place to browse all the newly released titles not featured opposite, including *Behind the Binoculars: Interviews with Acclaimed Birdwatchers* by Birdwatch columnist Mark Avery and Keith Betton, plus the fascinating memoir by Sarah Woods, *On a Wing and a Prayer*. You'll also find hundreds of other titles all at our special Bookshop prices.

This exciting move for the Birdwatch Bookshop will enable us to bring you even more special offers on new releases, plus a wealth of back-catalogue bargains. ■

appeal to anyone with an interest in wildlife and conservation, not

just the butterfly enthusiast.
Rebecca Armstrong

More info

- *In Pursuit of Butterflies: a Fifty-Year Affair* by Matthew Oates (Bloomsbury Natural History, London, 2015).
- 480 pages, 16 colour plates, a few black-and-white line drawings.
- ISBN 9781472924506. Hbk, £18.99.



a section on 'aviary notes', giving information on how to house, feed and breed them in captivity, as well as known hybrids or mutations, possibly with an eye on sales to aviculturalists – columbids are, after all, popular cagebirds.

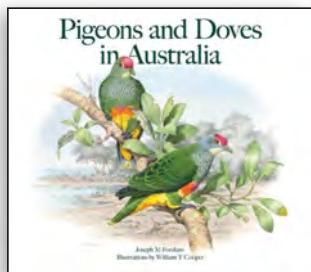
Slight misgivings about this final section aside, this is a comprehensive, absorbing and accurately detailed account of a fascinating family. The book is recommended to all birding visitors to and residents of Australia who wish to be well informed about the country's native pigeons and doves.

David Callahan

More info

- *Pigeons and Doves in Australia* by Joseph M Forshaw (CSIRO Publishing, Australia, 2015).
- 332 pages, 62 colour illustrations, 18 line drawings, 34 tables, 33 maps.
- ISBN 9780643096332. Hbk, £16.99.

Doves from Down Under



AMONG the many birds found in the Australasian region, the pigeons – despite their almost worldwide distribution as a family – are one of the most diverse radiations there.

This new and sumptuous reference work covers all 35 species recorded in the political unit of Australia (which includes

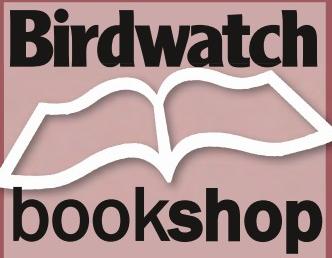
Christmas Island, the Cocos-Kelling Islands and the Torres Strait islands just off the southern coast of New Guinea), as well as three island species that have become extinct in historical times on Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands.

Like many other tropical pigeons and doves from other parts of the world, the family has evolved many impressively gaudy plumages in Australia, and has also filled numerous ecological niches since most of the native species invaded from Asia via New Guinea. The book accommodates these inspiring forms by illustrating each species with a beautiful full page colour painting, as well as the occasional smaller identification drawing.

After a detailed introduction



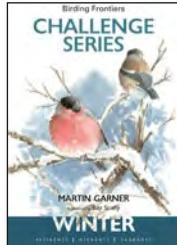
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Book of the month



Birding Frontiers Challenge Series: Winter

Martin Garner

£17.99 ONLY £16.99*

* This title is exempt from free UK p&p
(+ £2 p&p UK, £5.50 Europe, £8 ROW)

Offer ends 31 October



FOLLOWING the launch of Birding Frontier's incredibly popular Autumn ID guide, this second part of the *Challenge Series* looks at winter conundrums. Covering resident, wintering and vagrant species, the book is packed with little-known birds and tricky identification problems. Covering more than 40 taxa in 15 chapters, much of the material is brand new, including some of the very latest discoveries. Laying down a series of challenges to go out and test this cutting-edge information, each is accompanied with concise and accessible text, photos, illustrations and sonograms. Inspiring narratives, key ID points and high-quality artwork and photography all make each challenge as easy as possible to follow.

Inglorious

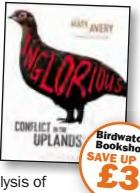
Mark Avery

£16.99 Only £14.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £13.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer ends 30 September



Presenting both sides of the divisive issue of driven grouse shooting, the author gives a fair and detailed analysis of this multi-million pound pastime, and explains why he is in favour of an outright ban. This new title is guaranteed to stir up a debate about fieldsports, the countryside and big business.

Collins Bird Guide

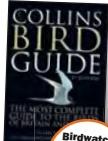
Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney, Dan Zetterström and Peter J Grant

£19.99 Only £16.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £14.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



The ultimate field guide covering the birds of Britain and Europe has just been updated with some important changes to the second edition, including new plates and illustrations.

Behind the Binoculars: interviews with acclaimed birdwatchers

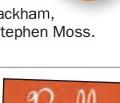
Mark Avery and Keith Betton

£16.99 Only £15.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £14.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



A fascinating collection of in-depth interviews with some of our most well-known birding and wildlife personalities; including Chris Packham, Mark Cocker, Ian Wallace and Stephen Moss.

Bill Oddie Unplugged: Columns, Blogs and Musings

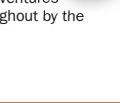
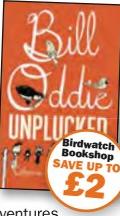
Bill Oddie

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(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



A collection of Bill's recently published thoughts on birds, birding and his many wildlife adventures over the years. Illustrated throughout by the author's unique line drawings.

Collins BTO Guide to British Birds

Paul Sterry and Paul Stancilffe

£19.99 Only £18.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £17.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



A unique identification guide sourcing data from the *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, featuring all the birds that occur regularly in Britain and Ireland. Text and 1,200 photographs describe and illustrate key features, enabling identification of tricky and confusion species.

Collins BTO Guide to Rare British Birds

Paul Sterry and Paul Stancilffe

£24.99 Only £20.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £19.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer ends 31 October



The companion volume to *Collins BTO Guide to British Birds* above, this new release covers all the rare and scarce birds that have ever occurred in Britain and Ireland.

RSBP Spotlight: Robins

Marianne Taylor

£9.99 Only £8.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £7.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



This latest release from the delightful *Spotlight* series provides a revealing account of the life cycle, behaviour and breeding of one of our most well-loved and instantly recognisable birds.

Iceland (Crossbill Guides)

Dirk Hilbers

£23.95 Only £21.95

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £20.95

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



This new book from the respected Crossbill Guides imprint will take you to the best places to see birds, wildflowers and cetaceans, and explore the spectacular geology and fascinating ecology of Iceland.

Birds of South-East Asia: Concise Edition

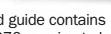
Craig Robson

£30 Only £26.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £25.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer ends 30 September



This new concise edition of the original and comprehensive field guide contains up-to-date information on all 1,270 species to be found in the region, covering Thailand, peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Nature's Conscience: the Life and Legacy of Derek Ratcliffe

Edited by Des Thompson, John Birks and Hillary Birks

£23 Only £21.99

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £20.99

(UK only)

Offer extended to 30 September



Containing 25 chapters by friends and colleagues of Derek, this new title reveals many aspects of this passionate conservationist's life and long-standing legacies.

Birdwatching Guide to North East Germany and its Baltic Coast

Roger White

£17.95 Only £16.95

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £15.95

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



Best Birdwatching Sites in North Wales

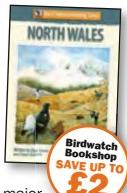
Alan Davies and Owen Roberts

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Undiscovered Owls

Magnus Robb and The Sound Approach

£39.95 Only £35.95

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £34.95

(+ £10 p&p Europe, £12 ROW)

Offer extended to 30 September



This groundbreaking book focuses on the owls of the Western Palearctic, North Africa and the Middle East, exploring the vocalisations of 38 different forms including several new species, and with 327 digitally recorded sounds.

On a Wing and a Prayer

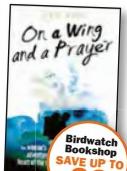
Sarah Woods

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Offer extended to 30 September



Telling the remarkable story of one woman's life-long dream to embark on an intrepid adventure into the jungles of Central and South America in search of the famously rare and elusive Harpy Eagle.

Britain's Dragonflies: a Field Guide to the Damselflies and Dragonflies of Britain and Ireland

Dave Smallshire and Andy Swash

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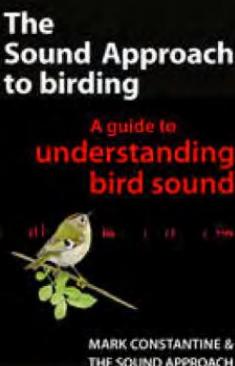
Offer extended to 30 September



The fully updated third edition to the only comprehensive photographic field guide to dragonflies and damselflies.



ebookguide



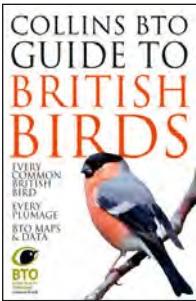
Editor's choice

The Sound Approach to Birding: A Guide to Understanding Bird Sound By Mark Constantine and The Sound Approach

RRP/Price: £14.99

This award-winning first title from The Sound Approach team has been transformed into a smart interactive ebook. Taking you on a fascinating journey, it will enable you to understand bird sound, with more than 200 high-quality recordings of mostly European species easily enjoyed with the simple tap of the screen. Suitable for birders of all experience levels, this is the must-have guide to a complex but fascinating subject – if you buy no other book on bird songs and calls, ensure you have this one in your collection.

BUY

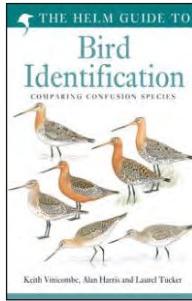


Collins BTO Guide to British Birds By Paul Sterry and Paul Stancliffe

RRP/Price: £16.85

BUY

Featuring all of Britain and Ireland's regular species, this unique new identification guide is designed for use in the field, with text and photographs depicting the key features needed to identify any species with confidence.

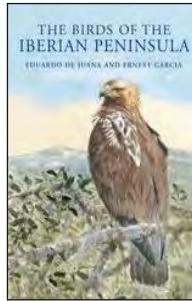


The Helm Guide to Bird Identification By Keith Vinicombe

**RRP: £25.00
Price: £21.99**

BUY

This best-selling ID guide looks at tricky species pairs or groups of birds, comparing and contrasting their respective features. Designed as a field companion, it supplements standard field guides and provides detailed additional information.



Birds of the Iberian Peninsula By Eduardo de Juana and Ernest Garcia

**RRP: £60
Price: £49.99**

BUY

This new title is the first comprehensive guide to the avifauna of one of Europe's most ornithologically varied regions, and covers all species recorded in Spain, Portugal and Gibraltar, as well as the Berlengas and Balearic Islands.

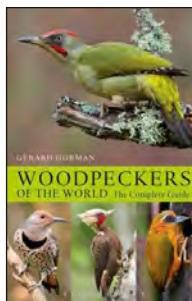


Owls of the World: A Photographic Guide By Heimo Mikkola

RRP/Price: £21.99

BUY

The ultimate resource dedicated to these charismatic predators, in ebook form optimised for tablets, with crisp, fully zoomable photography plus a definitive and truly comprehensive sound archive of more than 500 songs and calls.

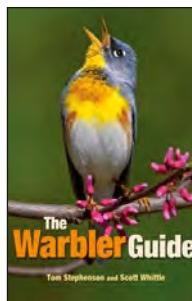


Woodpeckers of the World: the Complete Guide By Gerard Gorman

**RRP: £29.99
Price: £19.49**

BUY

This stunning photographic guide covers all 239 species of woodpecker. The concise text looks in detail at their biology, with particular emphasis on field identification, as well as voice, habitat, status, racial variation and distribution.

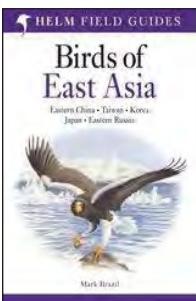


The Warbler Guide By Tom Stephenson and Scott Whittle

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BUY

This groundbreaking guide features more than 1,000 stunning colour photos, extensive species accounts with multiple viewing angles, and an entirely new system of vocalisation analysis that helps you distinguish songs and calls.

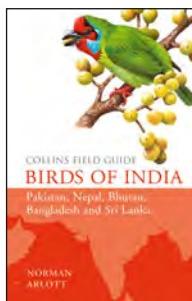


Birds of East Asia

**By Mark Brazil
RRP/Price: £19.99**

BUY

Featuring high-resolution and fully zoomable colour plates, plus comprehensive identification text and accurate range maps, this enhanced ebook also contains songs and calls, making it a truly indispensable guide for any trip to the region.

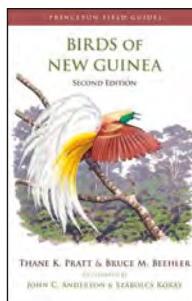


Birds of India

**By Norman Arlott
RRP: £19.99
Price: £12.99**

BUY

This attractive Collins field guide covers all bird species occurring in Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Andaman Islands, the Nicobar Islands and the Maldives, with beautiful artwork and comprehensive text.



Birds of New Guinea By Thane K Pratt and Bruce M Beehler

**RRP: £41.94
Price: £27.26**

BUY

This completely revised second edition is the only guide to cover all 780 bird species recorded in the area. With added colour plates and maps, this book also has updated text with new information on ID, voice, habits and range.



appguide

Editor's choice



Collins Bird Guide

Reimagined for iPad and iPhone, this intuitive app combines the acclaimed illustrations and species accounts of the field guide with scalable maps and vocalisations for over 700 species; there's even an optional video library. The only downside is no Android version.



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Aves Vox Pro

An excellent bird sounds app which utilises Xeno-Canto's database of recordings of 80 per cent of the world's birds, and is based on the IOC species list. This pro version lets you mark and show only favourite sounds, create and search species lists, filter recordings and repeat playback.



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Birds of Britain and Ireland (Pro Edition)

This high-quality digital field guide covers 271 species regularly occurring in Britain and Ireland. Comprehensive information includes multiple illustrations and photos, audio recordings of songs and calls, distribution maps and detailed text from BWP Concise.



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Bird Journal

Arguably the leading cross-platform listing app, Bird Journal lets you record, explore and share your bird and wildlife observations, sync data across multiple devices and submit to BirdTrack or eBird. The premium edition is £39.99, but is a worthwhile upgrade for the many extra features. Recommended.



Download from the App Store Free GET IT ON Google play



Bird Songs Europe

Probably the best audio resource for Western Palearctic bird sounds, featuring 2,833 recordings of 802 species, together with spectrograms, 1,350 photos, 600 maps, Wikipedia links and the facility to create a sightings list. It's undeniably expensive, but unrivalled for use in the field.



Download from the App Store £52.99 GET IT ON Google play



Bird Ticker

This simple but practical app is great for listing your bird sightings. The latest version now starts with a blank database, allowing users to select British, Western Palearctic or North American base lists before they start ticking. Sites visited are also linked with Google Maps. A snip at this bargain price.



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Birdwatcher's Diary

Fast and easy to use, this handy app allows you to note all the species you see or hear, including time and exact location, both of which are automatically recorded. You can review sightings as a list or on a Google map, upload them to eBird and do much more. Android users pay just £9.08.



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eGuide to Birds of the Middle East

One of the new generation of 'book apps', this eGuide features all the plates, text and maps from the Helm print edition, but with the bonus of audio recordings of 400 species and a 'Compare' facility, allowing two birds to be displayed together on the same screen.



Download from the App Store £21.99 GET IT ON Google play



The Sibley eGuide to the Birds of North America

The contents of America's leading field guide have been repurposed in this intuitive digital version, which boasts audio recordings alongside the plates, text and maps from the print edition. A listing feature lets North American users set location to filter species.



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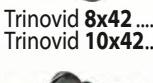


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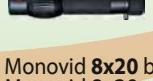
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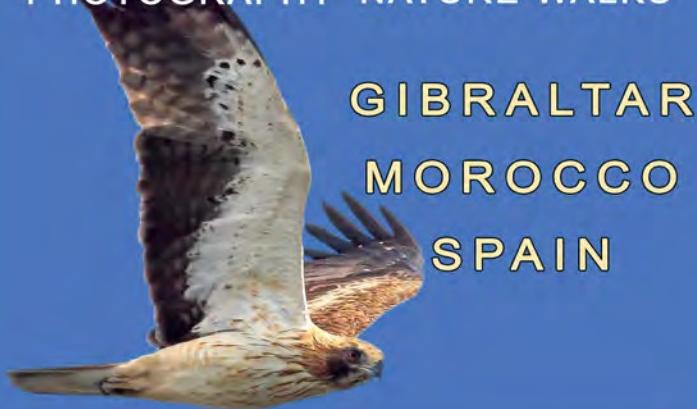


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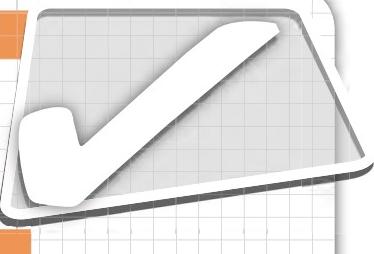
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EXPERT ADVICE



THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



DOMINIC MITCHELL
is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor, and author and editor of several bird books. He has been birding for more than 40 years.



HEIN VAN GROEW
is Curator of Birds at the Natural History Museum in Tring. He has a lifelong interest in colour mutations in birds.



DAVID CALLAHAN
Prior to joining *Birdwatch* as staff writer, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



STEVE YOUNG
is *Birdwatch*'s Photographic Consultant, as well as a keen birder and award-winning wildlife photographer.



CHRIS HARBARD
After many years at the RSPB, Chris is now a tour leader, writer and editor, dividing his time between Britain and the USA.



ROB HUME began watching birds as a child. He worked for the RSPB for many years and has written several books, including one on jizz.

The best tips, advice and more
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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Autumn exodus

A study estimated that 2.1 billion songbirds migrate from Europe to Africa every autumn, and found that 73 per cent of these belong to just 16 species. The study, published in 2009, included breeding birds, their offspring and a small number of non-breeders. The figure is an average of the estimated 1.5 to 2.9 million passerines and non-passerines that cross the Sahara every autumn.

Here is the top 10, using an average figure for each:

- **Willow Warbler:** 330 million individuals, which is about 16 per cent of the total number of birds involved. Willow Warbler reports to BirdTrack have an unusual peak in late July and early August.
- **Tree Pipit:** 153 million, though Britain has lost 86 per cent of its breeding population in 25 years. Peak migration takes place in late August and early September.
- **Swallow:** 136 million. Peak migration in Britain is late

September and early October. The first recovery of a British-ringed Swallow in South Africa was in 1912.

- **Common Chiffchaff:** 136 million. Others, which are not included in this number, undertake a partial migration within Europe or remain resident.
- **Spotted Flycatcher:** 103 million. Many British birds winter in coastal West Africa, but one Welsh individual was recovered in South Africa.
- **Garden Warbler:** 87 million. Garden Warblers refuel south of the Sahara before continuing their southward migration to areas such as the Congo Basin.
- **Common Whitethroat:** 85 million. Most autumn migration in Britain is from late August, continuing through September, with birds wintering just south of the Sahara in the Sahel zone.
- **House Martin:** 84 million. During the third week of September 2014, visible

Spotted Flycatcher breeds in Europe and winters in West Africa. It is estimated that some 103 million individuals of this species make this journey every autumn; despite this, however, it is Red Listed as a Bird of Conservation Concern in Britain due to a huge population decline over the past 30 years.



JONATHAN LETHBRIDGE (WWW.JUSTBIRDPHOTOS.COM)

migration watchers at Hengistbury Head, Dorset, recorded 38,000 House Martins passing through.

- **Pied Flycatcher:** 77 million. Migrating Pied Flycatchers are thought to travel at an average rate of about 90 miles per day.
- **Common Redstart:** 77 million.

Tracked birds from Denmark made two stop-overs on their way to winter quarters in the western Sahel region. ▀

- For the full study see *Oikos* 118: 624–626, available online at www.oikosjournal.org.

HOW TO ...

Bird by jizz

Jizz is one of those birding terms that can be difficult for beginners to fully understand. In his new mini-series, **Rob Hume** sets out to explain what it means and how it can improve your birding. Here he looks at jizz in terms of autumn warblers.

JIZZ: it's a funny word, just a snappy sound, like 'whizz' or 'pizzazz'. Perhaps character is a more descriptive term, more related to the way we recognise family and friends even in a crowd; it refers to a 'certain something', the way they look, move, or even just stand still. Trying to get others to recognise people they don't know is much harder; trying to tell people how to recognise birds in this way can be even more difficult.

How much can you rely on jizz? It is subtle, blends into other features and is hard to put into words. Specific marks are more concrete, making them easier to define and describe. Ian Wallace developed jizz descriptions further than anyone in his wonderful little essays in *Birds of the Western Palearctic*. This split opinions, as Ian usually does, as some thought they admirably complemented the dense descriptive texts, while others just wanted the concrete features, thinking jizz was irrelevant.

So is an appreciation of jizz useful or necessary? Well, yes and no! You see a large bird, some 50 feet up. It is long winged, with the wing-tips pushed forwards in its regular, deep, downward beats, with scarcely any lift above body level. It carries its large, thick head high, its slim, pointed tail low, a curiously distinctive feature recognisable a mile away. It dives into the sea, but if you had not already twigged that this big bright white bird with a golden-buff head and black wing-tips was a Northern Gannet, you really would be in trouble.

Arguably, Northern Gannet is all jizz, jizz personified. The way it carries itself, the way it flies, the way it dives to catch fish, everything about it is charismatic and full of character. But the combination of its size, shape,

plumage pattern, habitat and location make identification near instantaneous, so jizz doesn't come into it. Or maybe it is purely jizz that does come into it: seen it, got it.

But here's a small brown bird. It hops, flits, drops to the ground, sits up, looks around, bobs its head, takes a little double-footed jump before flying again. It cocks its tail, flicks its wings, looks alert, taut: lively even when sitting still. There is not much to say so plumage-wise, but clearly this is a juvenile Robin. Jizz scores heavily, as a Robin with no red could be a young Common Redstart, a Nightingale, or even a Dunnock, but its jizz is a dead giveaway.

Autumn is a great time to learn the character of some of our warblers before they disappear for the winter. A decent willow thicket, a patch of elders, a honeysuckle tangle full of energy-rich berries, or a belt of brambles and blackthorn mixed with tall reeds along a ditch, especially near the coast, are all ideal places to look for migrants.

That small green and yellow bird you locate could be either a Common Chiffchaff or Willow Warbler. 'Willow-chiffs' can be a real test, but the former's near-constant tail dip, combined with more monosyllabic calls (*hweet, swee* or *schlip*), helps.

On the berries, heavier movements reveal Blackcaps and Garden Warblers: more solid, dumpy birds, creeping inside the foliage, looking about from a perch for long spells before venturing to feed. Smaller, slighter, often incredibly neat and tidy, Lesser Whitethroats come to berries, too, if you can find them. In my part of the world they have become few and far between all summer. Autumn can offer a better chance to appreciate the subtleties of this smart little warbler compared with the longer tailed, slightly more brash

and confident demeanour of the much more frequent Common Whitethroat.

Be careful, though, because a brown warbler in a bush might not be any of these. A long, fine bill, flatter head and overall more elongated look might point to a Reed Warbler, which is a bit of a puzzle out of context away from its summer waterside environment. Its frequent short calls, elongated into a little *churr* if it is a bit unsure of itself, should help.

With these autumn warblers –

many of them quite bright-looking juveniles – jizz combines with more tangible features, as well as vocalisations, to create a distinctive 'whole'. With some of the warblers and many commoner birds, there is no problem – but can we learn the rarer ones, given sufficient first-hand experience, so that we recognise their jizz just as easily? Or can we at least recognise 'something different', a jizz that doesn't quite fit, sufficient to ring a few alarm bells? This series will begin to explore the possibilities. ■



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)

In autumn Common Chiffchaff (top) and Willow Warbler (above) can look very similar, with plumage differences not even offering as many clues to identification as in summer. However, their different 'character' or 'jizz' will help you separate the two species.



BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Up to the highest height



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

LOOKING for visible bird migration – or vis-migging, as it's known – has become very popular in recent years. It's easy to do: simply seek out a high vantage point and count the birds passing over. While this can result in some spectacular sightings, a great deal of migration takes place much higher and is only detectable by radar.

Birds will balance various factors before choosing how and when to migrate, and one of these will be at which height they should fly. One factor that determines height is wind. When flying into the wind, a bird's overall speed is diminished and it will not travel as it has to expend more energy. To reduce wind speed, birds may fly closer to the ground. In a tail wind, flying high is best to make use of greater speeds.

For every 1,000 m climbed, air density and oxygen levels decline by about 10 per cent. With thinner air comes less drag, making it less costly in energy terms. The pay-off is that more energy is used to maintain height when flapping. On the other hand, cruising or gliding becomes very efficient and will help to reduce overall flying time. So the weather conditions which most favour migration are clear skies with a

tail wind or very little wind at all.

Flying very high is less common, as at more extreme heights the winds may be in totally different directions to those closer to the ground. Very high wind speeds are usually avoided. Radar studies of birds flying through several western European countries reveal that they usually fly at heights between 1,000 and 3,000 m, although sometimes they reach up to 4,000 m. Studies indicate that larger birds are more likely to fly at higher altitudes, so passerines may fly lower than waterfowl or waders.

Birds do not like to fly in cloud. Studies of White Storks and Common Cranes show that soaring birds will cease to climb when they reach the cloud base. However, one flock of Common Cranes, seen at 4,300 m over the English Channel, was well above the cloud layer, but may not have climbed through it.

The land over which birds are flying will also affect their true height. Radar reveals that over low land most migration takes place no higher than 1,500 m above ground, with relatively few birds reaching 3,000 m. Soaring White Storks will migrate at

heights of about 1,000-2,500 m above land, which means that they can actually be flying at 2,500-4,000 m above sea level. Some of the highest migration takes place over the Himalayas, where Bar-headed Goose has been recorded up to 8,800 m above sea level. Measurements of birds over the Pamir mountains of Central Asia show some migration heights reaching 9,700 m above sea level.

Crossing water can be a problem for large soaring birds like raptors, storks and cranes. In order to cross seas and oceans, such as the Mediterranean, these birds will use thermals to gain height before losing it as they soar or glide over the water. Smaller birds which migrate over water may do so at heights to avoid storms or other

unfavourable weather conditions. Birds over the Caribbean en route from North America to South America were detected flying at heights of 4,000-6,000 m.

Air temperature falls as height is gained, being 7°C lower for each 1,000 m above sea level. As flight generates heat, flying higher will help prevent a bird from overheating, especially when migrating over hot areas such as deserts, reducing the risk of dehydration. However, humidity also declines with height and breathing in drier air could increase the risk of dehydration, making very high flight too risky.

High-altitude flight gives other benefits, including a better overview of the ground, the ability to fly over large geographic obstacles and the avoidance of predators. ■

Flights of fancy

Some bird species reach amazing heights while on migration. Here are a few of the highest recorded:

- **Whooper Swan:** recorded flying from Iceland to western Europe at 8,230 m.
- **Mallard:** one bird known to reach 6,400 m over Nevada, USA.
- **Northern Lapwing:** flocks logged at 3,900 m.
- **Common Swift:** routinely flies to 3,000 m at night.

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED



Q Having lived and birded inland for most of my 55 years, I now have the time and inclination to start learning about waders, and to that end would appreciate your help and advice. The photo above was taken on 2 July 2015 at Corralejo, Fuerteventura, Canary Islands, and from what I can make out it shows (from left to right) Eurasian Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit and Eurasian Curlew. What I would like to know is: am I on the right lines here or have I got it wrong again? Any help would be appreciated. Keep up the good work! Jim Green, via email

A Dominic Mitchell replies: "Waders are already on the move in early July, but it is

excellent work to find all three species set up in a row for comparison. From this we can see that your identifications are indeed correct.

The right-hand bird is clearly a Eurasian Curlew – note its relatively large and bulky size, the very long, evenly curving bill and the fairly consistent streaking over most of its body other than the belly and undertail area. It truly towers above the other two birds.

Moving on to the central bird, the pink-based, obviously upcurved beak immediately suggests that this is a Bar-tailed Godwit, a notion confirmed by the barring which can be seen on closer examination of its uppertail.

The bird on the left is clearly very similar to the Eurasian Curlew, but has some subtle

and not-so-subtle differences. Even allowing for perspective, it is smaller than the curlew and has a shorter bill, with a kink towards the tip. While the Eurasian Curlew's head is a plain streaky brown, the left-hand bird has a 'capped' and eye-striped look, with a paler supercilium; the head also looks slightly 'squarer'. Other than its curlew-like streaky brown upperparts, there are also hints of finer streaking on the flanks. Little else can be seen in this rear view, but these details are enough to declare this wader a Eurasian Whimbrel.

You should be pleased with your accurate identifications and I hope you find this encouraging for the future!" ■

Q Can anyone help ID this unusual bird which I found in woods on La Palma, Canary Islands, this spring? @juicesouppspill, via Twitter

A David Callahan replies: "While at first glance this bird looks to be a Chaffinch, you are right to call it 'unusual', as the Chaffinches of the North Atlantic islands are indeed very distinctive, and believed by some to constitute a separate species.

One of the Canary Islands forms – Blue Chaffinch – is already classed as a full species, but this individual doesn't belong to that very different taxon either. This is the *palmae* subspecies of Chaffinch, endemic to the island of La Palma.

There are three subspecies found only on the Canaries (the Azores and Madeira also have their own endemic forms). Helpfully this bird is male – females are very similar to the Chaffinches we see in Britain – and shows much of its diagnostic plumage.

The subspecies *palmae* is a dark slate blue on its crown and back, with no green tinge to its back or rump (the other two Canary Islands subspecies show some green on the rump). Crucially, *palmae* has an extensive white belly with a lot of slate blue on the flanks, which connects with that of the upperparts. All the Canarian forms lack the streaky brown on the back of the nominate subspecies from Europe, and have less white on the wing.

Plumage-wise these forms are halfway



between nominate Chaffinch and the North African subspecies. However, definitively sorting out all these forms of Chaffinch in a taxonomic sense is still a long way off. Still, seeing such unique forms, whether tickable or not, is one of the greatest pleasures in birding." ■

The Big Question: Starlings as pests

Q I work in the grasslands of South Africa and local farmers have complained about (European) Starlings that have recently become a pest in their feedlots. It is winter at the moment, which is probably not helping. I was wondering if you might have any advice about this problem. Please can you let me know about anyone who works with this kind of situation. Bradley Gibbons, via email

A David Callahan replies: "Despite being many Britons' favourite bird, Starling is an invasive alien in many parts of the world, causing all sorts of agricultural and biological havoc.

As you suggest, South Africa is one of the countries where the species causes a lot of damage, and consequently BirdLife

South Africa (BLSA) has a policy of eradication. Starling was recently declared one of the world's 100 most destructive species by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, as it displaces native birds, damages crops, destroys some beneficial insects and spreads alien plant seeds and disease.

However, controlling Starlings is not easy, and actual eradication unlikely with current approved methods. Partial success has been documented using netting over crops and habitat to reduce the availability of feeding and nesting sites. Broadcasting distress calls is fairly ineffective, while trapping and poisoning have not made much of a dent in its numbers.

For advice on getting rid of the species in South Africa, you should contact BLSA at info@birdlife.org.za." ■



VYTAUTO (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

Q One of our customers sent us this photo (below) – is this a Peregrine Falcon? We have these nesting close to us every year. Scout Cragg Caravan Park, via email

A David Callahan replies: "Though your caravan park is situated on Morecambe Bay, Lancs, and Peregrine Falcon is a possibility, your bird is actually a Kestrel. Giveaways include the fact that the bird – clearly a raptor – is hovering, and has a clear rufous tinge on its head and what can be seen of the upperparts – this is proof that it is a Kestrel, and most likely a female. In combination with these features, the obvious black tips to the fanned tail are also helpful in distinguishing it from most other small birds of prey." ■



Q This strangely marked Canada Goose has been appearing in a flock of other feral geese at various places along the Dorset coast over the past few months. While it seems to have been accepted by others in the flock, they appear wary of it. What has caused this colour aberration and is it likely to prevent it from getting a mate? David Wareham, via email

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A Hein van Grouw of the Natural History Museum Bird Group, Tring, replies: "This seems to most likely be a form of 'progressive greying' (PG) to me. Although less likely, it could also be the result of earlier injuries but you would also expect pigmentless spots on the beak."

PG is not uncommon, and as you may recall from previous Q&A responses, the causes for PG are often unknown. This bird will probably develop more white feathers over the years.

As regards its potential to breed, I know of many examples in many species where aberrantly 'pied' birds (due to progressive greying) have successfully bred in the wild." ■

Second-ever Hen Harrier Day a success

In an unprecedented demonstration of public support, thousands turned out ahead of the start of the grouse-shooting season in August to mark the annual event highlighting the plight of a species targeted by wildlife criminals linked to shooting interests.

The main attraction took place in the Peak District, Derbyshire, on 9 August, with many hundreds of concerned members of the public gathering in the Goyt Valley, a beautiful but harrier-less area of national park

moorland. Keynote speakers included broadcaster and campaigner Chris Packham, *Birdwatch* columnist Mark Avery and the RSPB's Jeff Knott, all of whom spoke passionately about the problems affecting the beleaguered raptor and possible solutions, while a group of youngsters held a symbolic funeral for the slaughtered birds, carrying a coffin and placards reading 'RIP birds of prey' and 'Raptor death zone'.

There were similar well-attended events elsewhere around

the country, including Lancashire's Forest of Bowland, Perth and Kinross and Mull, Scotland, Saltholme RSPB, Teesside, and at Arne RSPB in Dorset, where *Birdwatch* editor Dominic Mitchell and LUSH Cosmetics' Mark Constantine – creator of the Hen Harrier Bath Bomb (see page 93) – were among those taking part. The buzz created meant that #HenHarrierDay trended to number 5 on Twitter and reached more than 5.5 million people on the day.

This success is all the more important in view of continued raptor persecution and the sustained campaign against the RSPB by You Forgot The Birds (YFTB), fronted by keen game

shooter Ian Botham and funded by the shooting lobby. YFTB placed stories in the national press in the run-up to Hen Harrier Day claiming that the RSPB had failed to protect five Hen Harrier nests in England this year, and also falsely stating that a further six nests were successful on grouse moors. In fact, as revealed shortly afterwards in a Natural England report, there were no successful harrier nests on English grouse moors this summer, while previously this year five breeding males had disappeared mysteriously, causing desertion of the nests by their attendant females. One nest also failed due to natural predation. ■

• bit.ly/bw279HHday



CHRIS PACKHAM

LISTCHECK

Updating avian taxonomy

Hiding in plain site

PLAIN Wren *Cantorchilus modestus* is a common and numerous species in Central America, inhabiting lowland and middle elevation hill country.

Assessing measurements, plumage differences and mitochondrial DNA samples from across the species' known range has led researchers to declare its three known subspecies as full species in their own right.

The distinctiveness of each subspecies' size, shape and plumage colours was paralleled by DNA divergences. These distinctions were also mirrored by the major geographical habitats or 'ecoregions' in which each was found, with a notable break between northern and southern populations on the Costa Rican Pacific Slope.

The *Handbook of the Birds of the World* has already split *C. modestus* (southern Mexico to Costa Rica) and Canebrake Wren *C. zeledoni* (eastern Nicaragua, eastern Costa Rica and

north-west Panama), but the authors now also consider Panama Wren *C. elutus* to be a

full species. The three taxa appear to have diverged between two and three million years ago.

The International Ornithological Congress's taxonomy, which *Birdwatch* follows, is expected to be updated accordingly soon. ■

REFERENCE

- Saucier, J R, Sánchez, C, and Carling, M D. 2015. Patterns of genetic and morphological divergence reveal a species complex in the Plain Wren (*Cantorchilus modestus*). *The Auk* 132: 795-807.



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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

A breed apart

ANDREW MOON

Research suggests that Audubon's Warbler could be a stable hybrid between Myrtle and Black-fronted Warblers.



AT one time, one definition of a species was that it could not interbreed with any other species. The recent problems facing White-headed Duck in Europe following the arrival of the introduced Ruddy Duck, with which it began to mate, shows the picture is not always that simple.

The word hybrid is something many birders dislike. A hybrid is neither one species nor the other, so cannot easily be categorised and placed on any list. Problems with the identification of some birds with characters that do not fit a known pattern may be put forward as possible hybrids, and there is no doubt that these do occur.

It seems that 'hybrid speciation', which occurs commonly among plants, can also happen in birds. Once regarded as a hybrid between

House and Spanish Sparrows (or even a subspecies of either), Italian Sparrow is now recognised by many authorities as a full species, endemic to the Western Palearctic. That it came about through the interbreeding of these two closely related species is fully accepted.

It is also postulated that Pomarine Skua may have once originated from interbreeding between Great Skua and a smaller skua species. In order to become a stable species, it must be reproductively isolated with only a small hybrid zone between it and the two 'parent' species.

Genetic analysis of Audubon's Warbler (the western form of Yellow-rumped Warbler) in the United States suggests that, confusingly, it is a stable hybrid between Myrtle (eastern Yellow-rumped) and Black-fronted

Warblers, the *nigrifrons* Yellow-rumped form from Mexico. There are several hybrids between North American warblers which have their own names, as they occur regularly and were at one time

regarded as separate species. 'Brewster's' and 'Lawrence's' Warblers, for example, were both the result of interbreeding between Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers.

'Cox's Sandpiper', described from Australia in the 1950s, was declared a new species in 1982. It was later found to be a hybrid between male Pectoral and female Curlew Sandpipers.

Ducks are known to hybridise readily and more than 400 inter-species combinations have been recorded among the Anatidae. The amount of hybridisation within the genus *Anas* suggests that some full species may have originated from hybrid speciation. Gulls also hybridise frequently and the debate still rages over whether Kumlien's Gull is a hybrid between Thayer's and Iceland Gulls, a subspecies of Iceland Gull, or whether all three are the same species.

So the next time you see a hybrid individual, spend a little time considering that it might just be a species of the future! ■

EVENT OF THE MONTH

■ The Big Birdhouse Tour



A partnership between the RSPB and intu shopping centres, the Big Birdhouse Tour aims to engage millions of shoppers across Britain, raising important funds and awareness for the wildlife charity. Each of the larger-than-life birdhouses has been designed by a different celebrity. In September, the tour will be at Braehead shopping centre, Renfrewshire, until 18th and then at the Metrocentre, Newcastle, from 20th. ■

MORE INFO Date: throughout September. Time: see shopping centre opening times. Entry: free. Further information: bit.ly/bw279BirdTour.

SUNDAY HIGH TIDES IN SEPTEMBER

	6th	13th	20th	27th
Exe Estuary (Starcross)	00.46	07.54	11.31	06.49
Devon	13.14	20.06	23.52	19.10
Poole Harbour (town quay)	04.11	10.03	01.38	09.15
Dorset	16.54	17.12	14.11	21.28
Langstone Harbour (Northney)	06.14	00.21	04.22	11.40
Hampshire	18.45	12.41	16.42	23.59
Thames Estuary (Sheerness)	07.03	01.16	05.19	00.10
Kent	19.34	13.29	17.39	12.32
London Bridge	08.14	02.34	06.34	01.26
Greater London	20.43	14.48	18.53	13.49
Colne Estuary (Wivenhoe)	06.36	00.55	04.51	—
Essex	19.07	13.07	17.12	12.10
Blakeney Harbour	01.04	07.29	11.40	06.24
Norfolk	13.42	19.47	—	18.49
Hunstanton	00.33	07.13	11.09	06.09
Norfolk	13.07	19.35	23.33	18.40
Blacktoft	01.07	07.36	11.46	06.29
Yorkshire	13.43	19.55	—	18.55

Full moon date is Monday 28 September

	6th	13th	20th	27th
Teesmouth	10.25	04.23	08.22	03.23
Durham/Yorkshire	23.03	16.48	20.46	15.56
Holy Island	09.00	03.13	07.10	02.18
Northumberland	21.32	15.34	19.30	14.47
Firth of Forth (Cockenzie)	09.17	03.26	07.17	02.31
Lothian	21.54	15.51	19.41	15.06
Morecambe Bay	05.48	—	03.53	05.46
Lancashire	18.26	12.14	16.17	18.10
Dee Estuary (Hilbre)	05.27	11.52	03.32	10.53
Cheshire	18.06	—	15.56	23.12
Loughor Estuary (Burry Port)	00.34	07.10	11.05	06.11
Carmarthenshire	13.10	19.25	23.31	18.33
Severn Estuary (Berkeley)	02.06	08.51	00.25	07.46
Gloucestershire	14.39	21.07	12.46	20.09
Belfast	05.44	—	03.53	11.02
Co Down	18.18	12.01	16.16	23.19
Dublin (North Wall)	06.18	00.12	04.17	11.47
Co Dublin	18.53	12.36	16.40	—

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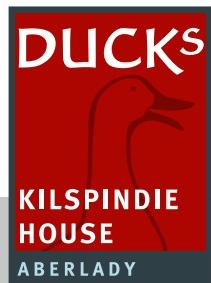
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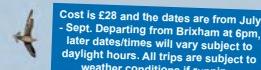


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■ **Eastern promise** October is prime time for Siberian migrants in Britain, but in recent years their fortunes have fluctuated markedly. Birds like Yellow-breasted Bunting have become extreme rarities, while others such as Red-flanked Bluetail are now expected in numbers. David Callahan looks at the changing trends for autumn's most enigmatic rare visitors.

■ **Which shrike?** At this time of year the first Great Grey Shrikes also arrive for the winter. But not every grey shrike is a Great, and passage periods bring the possibility of both rarer species on the British list, Steppe Grey and Lesser Grey. Andy Stoddart unravels the field identification of these three similar species and looks at their taxonomy.

■ **Split personality** The plain appearance of 'Bonelli's Warbler' hides a fascinating story which includes a controversial first British appearance, a history of misidentification and ultimately a split into two species, both of which are prone to appear in Britain at this time of year. David Callahan reports.

■ **Lifers ahoy!** It's ferried thousands of birders to and from Britain's most popular rarity hot-spot, Scilly, and in the process been responsible for adding countless ticks to life lists. From petrel-fuelled pelagics to stormy mainland crossings, James Hanlon take a fond look at that ultimate of birding vessels, the MV Scillonian III.

PLUS bird strikes on buildings, all of autumn's big rarity stories, full round-ups of recent sightings for Britain, Ireland and the Western Palearctic, Mark Avery, Steve Young's photo challenge, reviews, news, views and birding Q&A with our team of experts.

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your letters & photos

Flying return

You may recall the Spotted Flycatchers nesting in a rotten fencepost in my garden in Argyll which featured in The big picture last year (see *Birdwatch* 266: 6-7). They are here again, but not nesting in the post, however. There are actually two nests now producing the great result of seven fledged young, and this from a garden with resident Pine Martens!

This means that Spotted Flycatchers have successfully bred in the garden for the fifth year running now.

The young bird pictured was only a few days out of the nest and was at first lost, until it eventually found its way up into the lower branches of a Rowan several minutes later, where the watchful adult was constantly calling with food.

Another good year for the Auchnasaul garden Spotted Flycatchers!

Bill Jackson, via email



Is Western Subalpine Warbler, like this bird on Holy Island, Northumberland, in April 2011, really a separate species from Eastern Subalpine?



JOHN MALLOY

Italian job

In his article on subalpine warblers (*Birdwatch* 276: 54-57), D I M Wallace delved into the taxonomy of the forms currently presented as two species (Eastern Subalpine and Western Subalpine Warblers) with adjoining ranges replacing the historical single species.

What scenario can account for this? The advancing cold of the 'Ice Age' drove subalpines south to Africa. They returned north during the warmer interglacials. An ice spur from the Alps almost reached the

Mediterranean, creating a geographical separation into two populations, destined to meet again eventually in north-west Italy. Reproductive isolation has probably never been achieved, so interbreeding will occur and on a much broader front as fidelity to home site and different migration routes cannot be that precise.

Clearly more work is needed, though one fears that, like in the movie *The Italian Job*, the story may yet still end in limbo in the central Mediterranean.

Arnold Hitchon, Norfolk

STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

The winner



LAST month's challenge was to photograph Arctic Tern before the species migrates south.

Steve Young said: "I was a little surprised at the number of entries for this month's challenge. Arctic Tern is a species which I expected lots of people to have photographed on the Farne Islands, Northumberland, this summer, and there were many excellent entries.

"I have selected a dramatic winning shot taken by Moss Taylor on the aforementioned Farnes, is a famous site for nesting birds, which often attack and harass visitors as they walk the footpaths.

"Congratulations to Moss on winning his copy of *RSPB Seabirds* by Marianne Taylor."

- Turn to page 72 for this month's photo challenge.

Join the debate online



• **Billionaire Crispin Odey was revealed as a financial backer of anti-RSPB website You Forgot The Birds (YFTB), in an article posted on our Facebook wall which claimed that the conservation charity was involved in 'class war' against grouse shooters.**

Tommy Richey: "Conservation, not class – but now that he's mentioned it, he would make a fine nominee for the Upper Class Twit of the Year award."

Simon Bradfield: "I wish the RSPB would take them on and support the petition to ban driven grouse shooting. If the RSPB are

guilty of anything it is being far too placid about the whole issue."

Ian Elphick: "If he feels that the problem is farmers using pesticides and he loves birds that much, why doesn't he take that issue on?"

Steve Woolfall: "If these people were real conservationists they would understand the issue and support it. This is about protecting Hen Harriers not having a go at anyone regardless of their bank accounts and position."

Andy Price: "Unfortunately some of what he says is true [about] the plight of farmland birds. Taking on people like this, many of whom own the land that hosts declining farmland species, may not be a good move when you rely on farmers' goodwill to help conservation. Can anybody see a government which supports the establishment banning grouse shooting anytime soon?"

Andy Middleton: "Let's face it, 18



Among the more novel promotions for Hen Harrier Day was the launch by LUSH Cosmetics of a bath bomb – christened 'Skydancer: Far From The Madding Guns' by TV presenter Chris Packham – all the proceeds from which will go towards conservation of the persecuted raptor.

fledglings and 12 nests [of Hen Harriers in England] is lamentable. We all know who is to blame and why. Great work RSPB and all the other organisations involved, but we do need to do much better.

Shame on you YFTB, The Telegraph and Ian Botham – your actions stink."



• *Further angry comments were posted on our partner website BirdGuides.com.*

Derek Johnston: "Black is white and white is black to these people. How did they get privileged access to an unpublished DEFRA report?"

William Thom: "The destruction of raptors is so ridiculous in the 21st century. These estates need to be taken into public ownership and run as reserves."

Jeff Clarke: "YFTB emphasise their hate of raptors on their website with a picture of a Sparrowhawk which has just killed a House Sparrow, [saying]: "When we have too many birds of prey, they eliminate all our favourite garden birds". Sparrowhawk IS one of my favourite garden birds!"

Jim Clarke: "Standard tactics as seen previously with the fox hunting lobby and the RSPCA pre the Hunting with Dogs Act. RSPB-monitored Hen Harriers will be specifically targeted as part of grouse industry strategy of trying to undermine the organisation. No one is going to be able to justify the massive carbon footprint caused by intensive heather burning on peat for much longer."

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A 'WELL-KNOWN SHOOTER' REPLIES (WITH TONGUE FIRMLY IN CHEEK ...)

Now then, regarding this Hen Harrier nonsense. Don't you birdy chaps realise that these blasted creatures gobble up our poor defenceless baby grise. As Chairman of AGHASHT (All Grouse Herabites Are Shot Humanely Trust), I protest most fervently at the constant whining from all you town-dwelling greenie types. Most of you have never been in the proper countryside and wouldn't have a clue how to load a pair of Purdies in a Range Rover, never mind put a load of shot clear through the left eye of a French, partridge while sipping at the Pimms and counting the cash of the *nouveau riche*.

We introduced Mr and Mrs Eagle Owl to our lovely Outer Plebsdale in the first place, because my gillie, Bob, overheard one of you birdy-twitcher types say that they definitely kill other birds of prey. Granted, at first they did a bloody good job, but I was appalled when I found out that they had also dispatched 666 grise, three red setters, a patterdale, 23 sheep and an Albanian illegal, and then we had to employ a damned environmental consultant. My god man, do you think good gun dogs grow on trees!

Bring real raptors to the moors!

AGHASHT are not giving up on this matter. Before the next hunting season we will be introducing a new and perfectly natural predator to the moors to sort out the blasted harriers and Eagle Owls once and for all.

Bob met a man in a pub in Chipping who has just returned from the real Jurassic Park in Alaska. This person has managed to extract the DNA from a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. We intend to reintroduce this perfectly natural native animal which once roamed these moors asap, so you left-wing, commie-loving, greenie loonies can have no complaints whatsoever.



STU SPIVACK (COMMONSWIKIMEDIA.ORG)

According to Bob, the last one hereabites was accidentally killed by a meteorite only some 65 years ago.

Bob is a bit concerned that, when fully grown, the creature will be 25 feet tall and weigh around six tons. His cottage fence is only made of pressure-treated softwood panels, but I've assured him that the fence is quite sturdy and at least seven foot high. I have also advised him that in the unlikely event of any damage done to his person or his fence – well mine actually – he, that is I, will be fairly compensated by my friends in the government and the judiciary.

AGHAHST are confident that Mr or Mrs T Rex will do a much better job of controlling these appalling birds gobbling up our tiny grice than those bloody Eagle Owls ever did, and it's all natural and green to boot.

You see: we are not at all the self-interested, unfeeling, uncaring, pompous, arrogant bastards you think we are.

Captain Fotheringay Mannerig Smyth, Chairman, AGHASHT, Chumpley Hall, Lanarkshire/Lancashire/whatever – via John Bannon



BILL ODDIE Pest control



The Robin may be the nation's favourite, but what about the birds that people don't like? Some species seem to inspire anger despite not doing anything wrong, says Bill Oddie.



The much-maligned Woodpigeon definitely wasn't a favourite with Bill Oddie's new neighbour.

RALPH JONES

So Britain's favourite bird is the Robin. Even though rival Robins will viciously peck each other bald, it doesn't count against them, because it is 'nature's way'.

Anyone who has watched a Hen Harrier disembowelling a Meadow Pipit may not be enchanted by it, but accepts that it is simply 'doing what comes naturally'. To be truly disliked a bird has to have some direct negative effect on our lives.

I would never accuse any bird of doing anything wrong, but I have to concede that some of them can be a nuisance, or even a danger. Gulls or geese flocking round runways are definitely a matter of health and safety, even pest control. However, there are people who develop a phobia of a certain species, purely on what one might call aesthetic or cosmetic grounds.

A few years ago, I was relaxing at home when the tranquillity was shattered by the sound of gunfire. It sounded as if it was coming from next door. Within a few seconds the phone rang, and the scared and panicky voice of an elderly neighbour was asking me: "What's happening? I thought I just heard gunshots!" "You did," I reassured her, or maybe scared her even more.

I was pretty sure the shots were coming from the balcony of the house next door, which had only recently become occupied. The new tenant was a stocky Scottish bloke with a sea captain's cap and an indecipherable accent. There he was lounging in a garden chair with a shotgun across his lap. I asked the obvious question: "Was that you shooting?" "Aye," he admitted guiltlessly. I fashioned a wee rhyme: "He said 'Aye'. I asked 'why?' And he gave me this reply: 'It's the pigeons!'"

I was genuinely alarmed. "You're telling me you're bagging pigeons! In Hampstead! You're not in the Highlands now you know. We don't go in for field sports round here. Specially not shooting." "Och! They are not real," he grunted indignantly. "Yes they are," I countered. "They are Woodpigeons. They are wild birds." "I dinna mean the pigeons, I mean the bullets. They are only blanks." "Maybe so", I protested, "but they sound real. It sounds like the street's being invaded.

I've already had an old lady ring me, and the police will probably be round any second. It's gunfire. It's scary! You absolutely can't do it."

Purple poo

His next words were almost apologetic, and slightly pathetic. "But they are messing on my car," he whimpered. "They mess on all our cars," I assured him. "I can't get it off. It goes all hard. Really quickly." "Yes I know," I nodded. "And its purple, isn't it?" "Aye, why is that?"

I was tempted to make a whimsical quip about Prince and *When Doves Cry*, but decided instead to intrigue him with a little nature lesson. "They've been eating elderberries," I explained. "But I've not got an elderberry tree," he protested. I had to confess: "I have, and it's got masses of berries on it. They look black, but they come out purple."

"I thought bird droppings were white. Like the Northern Gannets on the Bass Rock." "You know the Bass Rock then?" "Oh aye, and I love the wee Puffins. Do they have purple poo?" "No, 'cos they've not been eating elderberries." "Oh aye, they eat those wee sandeels don't they?"

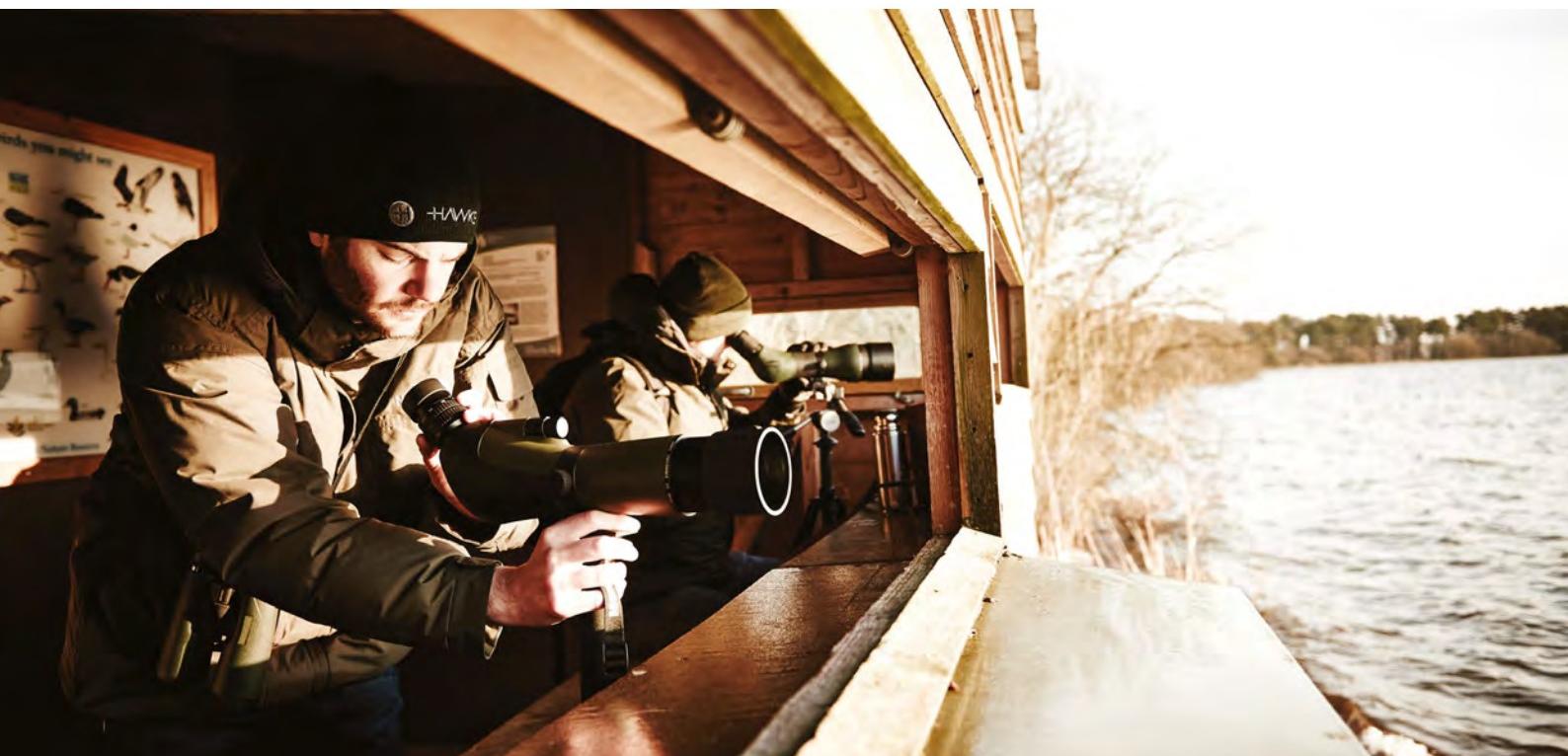
He sensed I was impressed. "I do a wee bit of sea fishing. Last month I had a whatsit? – a Little Auk bobbin round ma' boat. You'll have seen those? Tiny wee things." I said "Aye," but the truth is I have still only seen Little Auks belting past Flamborough Head about two miles out. I needed to regain the moral ground. "The thing is, we can't have a burst of gunfire every time a Woodpigeon poos in the street. And by the way, they don't just do it on windscreens, I once saw one plop straight into a pram, another just missed a poodle." "That's a pity, nasty yappy wee things!" he chuckled. I was beginning to like my new neighbour.

Ever since that day, not a single shot has been fired at our local Woodpigeons and – though they still poo on the cars – I sense that most people rather admire their portly plumpness and the subtle suffusions of their plumage. Iain and I came to an arrangement. I gave him lessons on identifying his garden birds. His wife taught me how to make elderberry wine. Traditionally drunk, by the way, with pigeon pie. ■

“I was genuinely alarmed. “You’re telling me you’re bagging pigeons! In Hampstead! We don’t go in for field sports round here.”

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Birdwatch

A decade of digiscoping



INSIDE

- DIGISCOPING IN FOUR STAGES
- PHOTOGRAPHIC HALL OF FAME
- EXPERT TIPS AND TRICKS
- GREAT PRIZES UP FOR GRABS
IN DIGISCOPE OF THE YEAR!

In association with
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OPTIK



The big digiscoped picture



Tequila sunset

Experienced digiscopers, like Sharon Stiteler from the US, can capture fantastic images with less equipment than DSLR users. She said about her stunning photo: "I love to see what I can accomplish with my iPhone. I was trying to capture the colours of the Florida sunset at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge with one of the many herons passing by. My iPhone 5s with a Swarovski i5 adapter was attached to my ATX 85mm spotting scope, using the iPhone's headphones as a remote shutter release. As the herons were flying past, I kept my thumb pressed on the volume down button for multiple shutter releases. Digiscoping can get great 'textbook' shots of birds, but with an iPhone and experimentation you can really capture the magic of what it's like to be in the field." ■



4



ANYONE who observes an exciting scene, finally spots a rare bird or a shy Otter after a long wait, or experiences a magnificent spectacle of nature has just one wish: to hold onto this unforgettable moment forever. Digiscoping has given people this opportunity, and Swarovski Optik has for the last 10 years embraced this relatively new form of photography by developing new digiscoping adapters in close co-operation with enthusiastic digiscopers; the result has been to produce simple and easy-to-use adapters.

This is the 10th year we have been running the Digiscoper of the Year competition and I must say that the overall standard of the photography is amazing. Nature's diversity and uniqueness is there to inspire us; after all there are 4,500 species of mammals and at least 9,900 species of birds worldwide. So take up the challenge and be creative – capture that precious and unique moment and allow us to share in your personal experience with nature.

I hope you will be inspired and decide to join us in celebrating the 10th Digiscoper of the Year competition (see page 17 for details). I wish you the best of luck and I look forward to seeing more wonderful and amazing images.

Peter Antoniou

Country Manager

UK and Republic of Ireland

Swarovski Optik

In association with

**SWAROVSKI
OPTIK**



Birdwatch

Managing Editor: Dominic Mitchell
Assistant Editor: Rebecca Armstrong

Staff Writer: David Callahan
Head of Design: Lynn Wright
Office Manager: Heather O'Connor
Advertisement Design: Cathy Herron

Publisher: Rob McDonnell
Advertisement Sales Manager: Ian Lyett (020 8881 0550)
Marketing Executive: Sarah Stephens (01778 395007)

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Cover: Willow Warbler by Sharon Stiteler and Black Tern by Jason Ward. **Above:** Forster's Tern by Dale Forbes; taken with a Swarovski STM80 scope and Canon 7D camera, this photo illustrates the challenge of taking flight shots using a digiscoping set-up.

1



DALE FORBES

The four stages of digiscoping



Dale Forbes looks at the four stages that have formed as the technique has become more sophisticated.

Bird photography has always been about trying to capture intimate moments in the lives of birds, but digiscoping has made capturing such moments much more accessible. The practice of using a compact camera – or even a smartphone these days – in combination with a telescope has grown into the world of bird photography, to play a much more

significant role than its humble beginnings might have suggested.

In the same way that digital photography has developed over the last couple of decades, we have seen some fascinating advancements in the world of digiscoping, not only from a product side, but also in the way that digiscoping is practised. The technique has developed four stages – or layers of complexity – since its

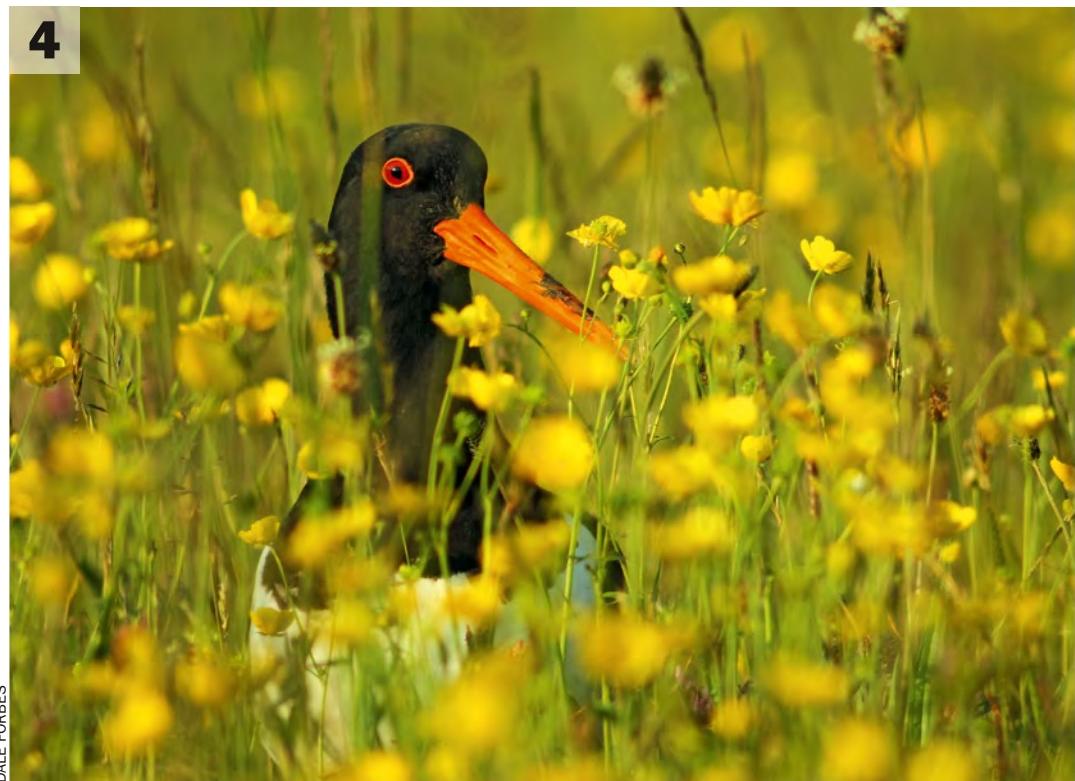
inception in the late Nineties, and each of these stages has contributed to and helped form how we see bird photography as a whole.

1

Quick and easy “How do I get a photo of a bird I see in my scope?” was the question aspiring digiscopers asked themselves when getting started. Birders were realising the value of complementing



4



DALE FORBES



2

GUDRUN KAUFMANN



3

GUDRUN KAUFMANN

1 This Common Redshank perched on a fencepost was taken using a Swarovski STM80 scope and Canon 7D camera. It demonstrates the technical challenge of achieving a sharp, well-composed image.

2 and 3 These two phonescoped shots were taken using a Swarovski ATX65 scope. Image 2 was taken with an iPhone 6 and 3 with an iPhone 5s. Photographer Gudrun Kaufmann uses the scope's close focus to take macro shots of insects in her garden.

4 Taken with a Swarovski STM80 scope and Canon 7D camera, this Oystercatcher is pin sharp.

HISTORY

1



DALE FORBES

their field notes by getting an image of a rare or unusual bird. This caught the attention of many, as it didn't really matter how good – or otherwise! – the photo was; the point was to get an identifiable image of the bird for later study, to grip off your friends down the pub or submit it to a records committee.

The result was every imaginable contraption and hand-position being used to somehow connect a camera at hand to the telescope trained on the bird. As time went by, digiscoping adapters started to hit the market, and experience helped guide newcomers in both selecting a camera suitable for digiscoping and how to get the set-up working efficiently. We started to see really good digiscoped photos of birds, with no vignetting and powered by the

reach of high-powered telescopes.

The regular birder was suddenly able to get close-up shots of birds that just a few years previously were the exclusive realm of professional wildlife photographers. In those early days, digiscopers were still working 2 MP compact cameras so, while the images were improving, they were still a long way away from those the pros were getting with their DSLRs and telephoto lenses. Nevertheless, just the fact that we could take these great images was both inspiring and fulfilling.

This world of getting nice shots of great birds is still around, except that one major thing has happened: it's got a whole lot easier! Smartphones have revolutionised how easy it is for the average birder to capture really good photos and videos of birds. With an iPhone and adapter, when you see

something interesting, all you need do is take your phone out of your pocket, press the adapter onto the eyepiece of the scope and tap away, with the autofocus helping out.

The phone's relatively small sensor has the advantage of giving quicker shutter speeds, so your photo is more likely to be sharp, and the cable release (also known as headphones) conveniently supplied free with the iPhone means that you don't have to tap the screen, reducing vibration and getting even sharper images. The iPhone has made up-close-and-personal bird photography easier than ever, and you can tweet or share your sightings immediately.

2 Technical

"How do I get my photos really sharp?" is a question most digiscopers

2



DALE FORBES



3



CLAY TAYLOR



MIKE MCDOWELL

5



DALE FORBES



will ask themselves at some stage. If you have found yourself intrigued by the allure of these intimate moments with birds, you will probably have spent time trying to understand the many complex factors at play when getting a sharp, well-composed photo with a digiscoping system: shutter speed, aperture, ISO, telescope quality, tripod, camera system options, counter-balance, stability, depth of field, focal points, diffraction effects and many more all play a part.

Technical articles, YouTube videos and forums are a great source of guidance, but most of all, getting out

in the field and practising and learning is what makes the most difference. It's a lot like *Phylloscopus* warbler identification – there's only so much we can learn from a book before we need to get out in the field and find warblers to practise on. Using flickr, Facebook or the Digiscoper of the Year competition can also provide a wealth of inspiration.

This 'technical' stage of digiscoping is all about learning how to get cracking, sharp shots of great birds: a Yellowhammer with its head thrown back blasting out its song about bread and cheese, or a stunning summer-

plumaged Common Redshank on a post in a wet meadow. This stage is fraught with challenges as it requires the photographer to really learn about the process in a much more conscious way than regular telephoto photography. Technical digiscoping has brought high-quality, high-focal-length bird photography to the average birder.

3 The challenge

'Challenge digiscoping' has gained momentum over the last five years, with digiscopers actively pushing their limits to the extreme.

1

Driven by the goal of trying out different (preferably difficult) things, challenge digiscopers have mastered areas of the craft we wouldn't have thought possible just 10 years ago.

Flight shots of birds are a favourite among many. Starting with Griffon Vultures in Extremadura or gulls at a local dump, taking flight shots represents the unique challenge of understanding flight behaviour, finding the correct body and tripod position (free-hand digiscoping²), planning an appropriate sunlight angle, getting the right background and lighting, and selecting the right shutter speed to get a well-lit, sharp photo without 'wasting' ISO. With experience and time, flight-shot enthusiasts will typically move on to try their hand at smaller and faster-moving birds, as well as flying dragonflies and other insects.

Night-time non-illuminated, automatically triggered, and flash digiscoping are all fields with lots of potential for exploration by challenge digiscopers, pushing the boundaries of what we think is possible. The Spanish digiscoping scene is definitely at the forefront in this regard.

Digiscoping was borne of the desire to bring birds that were really far

away, really close. But it is arguably macro digiscoping at the other end of the spectrum which is at the cutting edge of photography and videography right now.

A system like the Swarovski Optik STX65 with the TLS APO digiscoping adapter provides a maximum magnification ratio of about 1:1, making it a true macro objective, and that's at 2.2 m away from your subject. If digiscoping is about capturing intimate moments, then there is almost no better vehicle than macro digiscoping to open up whole new undiscovered worlds to the photographer and videographer: just imagine a full-frame dragonfly face shot as it chews through a blood-filled mosquito, or an adder's red eye staring while its tongue probes the air.

4 Art

The fourth category – the creative artist – is something we have started to see coming to digiscoping in the last few years. Motivated by a desire to capture and express an emotion – to move the viewer in some way – the creative artist might think of their digiscoping equipment as being like a great musical instrument, creating something beautiful when in

the right hands. They will be looking for unusual angles or compositions, playing with light, and typically have an intimate knowledge of their subject. Things like 'pixel-peeping' – the practice of examining an image right down to fine detail, pixel level – and classical rules become almost irrelevant, as the artist pursues an emotional response, attempting to capture the essence of what they are photographing.

A minute on Facebook will show just how important video has become in our lives, and digiscoping with relatively inexpensive HD and 4K cameras is shaping how we see and perceive birds, opening up this world to a much wider audience. Videographers are starting to discover the possibilities of digiscoping to create art, combining intimate moving images with sound to create works that move and inspire. One of the things I find most fascinating is that we often don't even realise that the sometimes stunning and inspiring footage we just saw on YouTube was made with the same equipment that 'Joe Birder' had on your local patch yesterday.

The creative stage is arguably the toughest to master, requiring a unique



2



JÖRG KRETZSCHMAR

3



JÖRG KRETZSCHMAR

4



DALE FORBES

Creative artists are really pushing the boundaries of digiscoping, moving the technique way beyond its humble beginnings to create stunning works of art.

1 Beautiful Demoiselle, STX95 scope and Nikon D800 camera.

2 Razorbill, STX95 scope and Nikon D800 camera.

3 Kittiwake, STX95 scope and Nikon D800 camera.

4 Knot and Oystercatchers, STX95 scope, TLS APO adapter and Olympus EM-1 camera.

Digiscoping hall of fame

As Swarovski's Digiscoper of the Year competition celebrates its 10th anniversary, we showcase the stunning winning shots from the previous nine years.

From its humble beginnings as a way to take record shots of rare or unusual birds, digiscoping has grown into an art form, with photographers all over the world specialising in this emergent discipline of bird photography.

At the heart of this growth is Swarovski's Digiscoper of the Year

competition, which is now entering its 10th year – see page 17 to see the very special new category to celebrate this anniversary, as well as instructions on how to enter. Over the following pages we present the winning images from the previous years, so if you're in need of some inspiration feast your eyes on these! ■

2007

2006



2008



Opposite Little Spiderhunter by Pitchaya Janhom, Thailand, winner 2007.

Above Buff-breasted Sandpiper by Pim Wolf, The Netherlands, winner 2006.

Left Hobby by Christian Aussaguel, France, winner 2008.

2009



2010

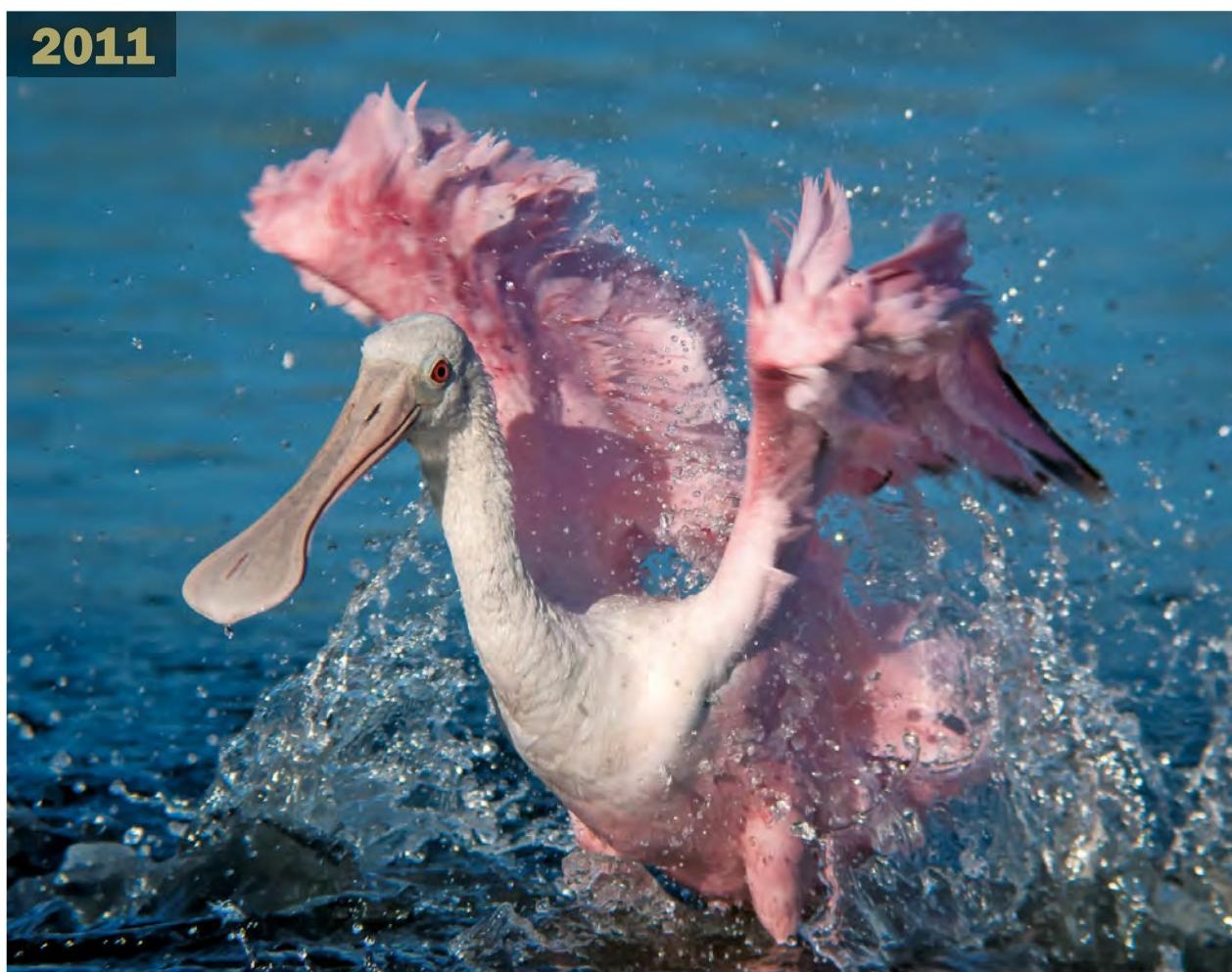


Opposite Little Egret by Juan Antonio Garcia Perez, Spain, winner 2009.

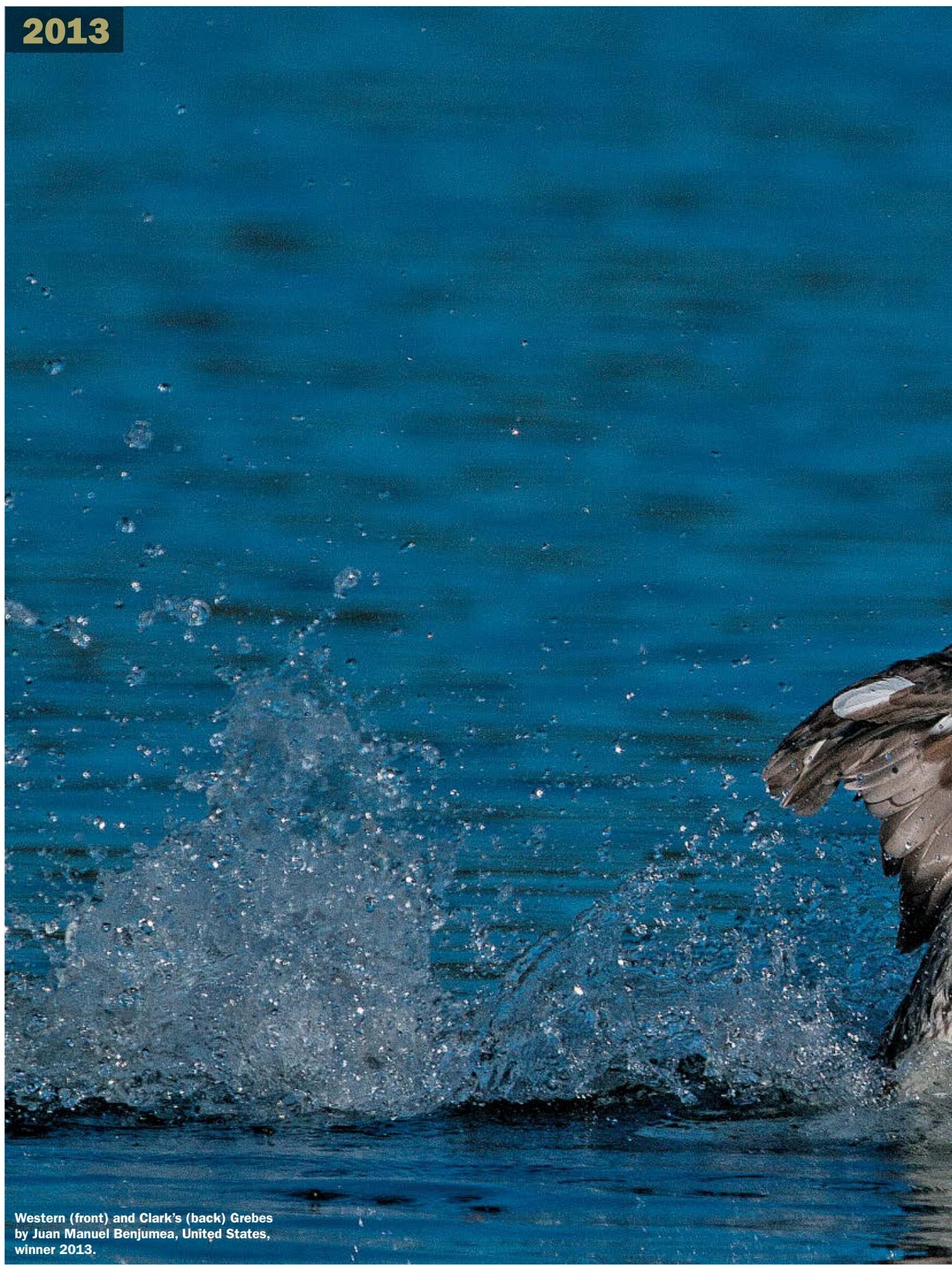
Left European Bee-eater by Oscar Gonzalez Herandez, Spain, winner 2010.

Below Roseate Spoonbill by Tara Tanaka, United States, winner 2011.

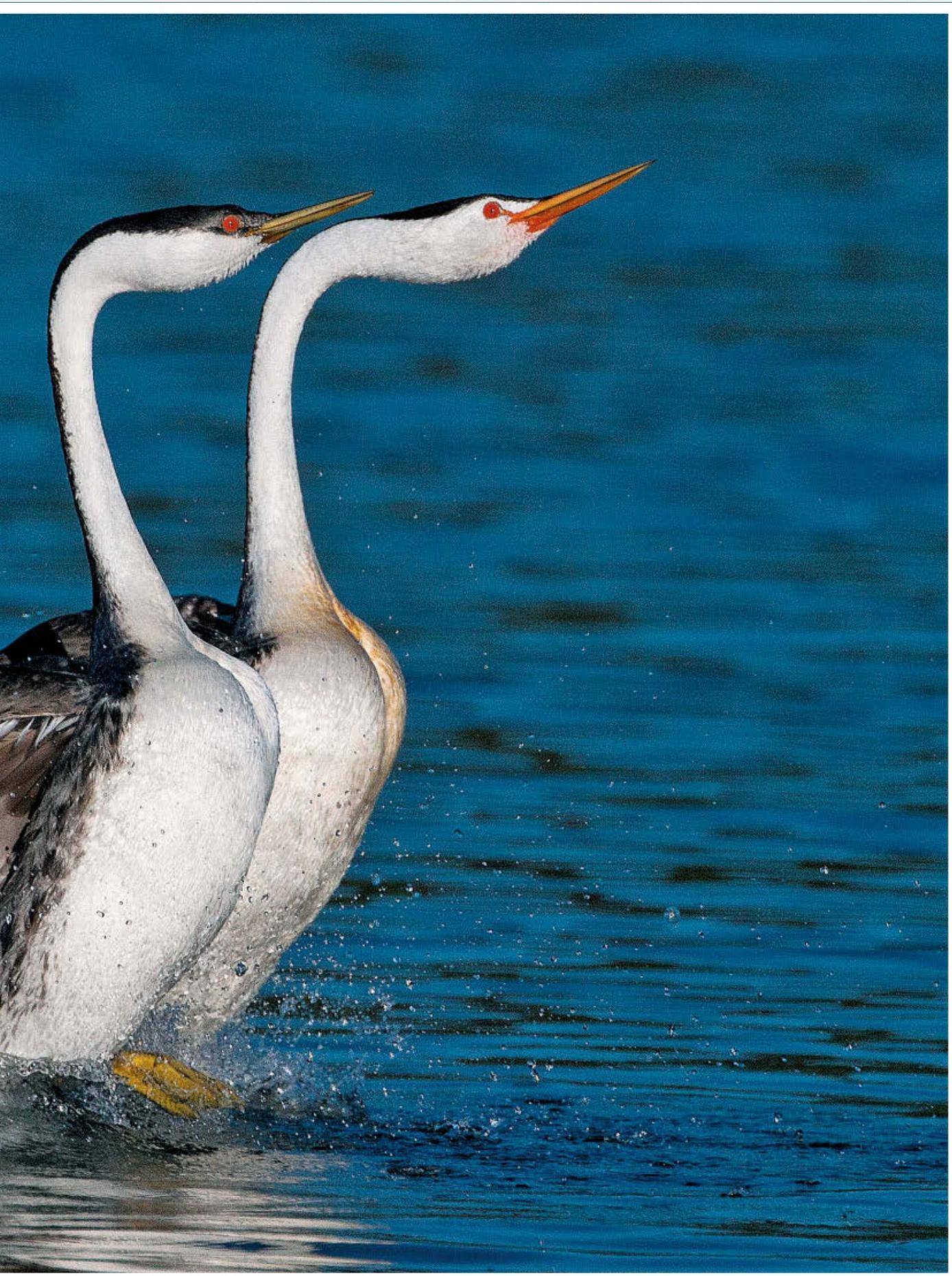
2011



2013



Western (front) and Clark's (back) Grebes
by Juan Manuel Benjumea, United States,
winner 2013.



2012

Above Cattle Egret by Tara Tanaka, United States, winner 2012.

Left and below Faszination Natur video featuring Griffon Vulture, Peregrine Falcon and other species by Jürgen Bergmann, Germany, winner 2014.

2014



Digiscoper of the Year 2015



JÜRGEN BERGMANN

In association with

Birdwatch

Last year's overall winner was the best entry in the inaugural Video category; *Faszination Natur* was shot by German digiscoper Jürgen Bergmann and featured Peregrine Falcon among other species.

THE prestigious Digiscoper of the Year competition, organised by Swarovski Optik and partnered by *Birdwatch* magazine, is 10 years old this year. To mark the occasion, the optics manufacturer has introduced a new category: Animal Antics.

This special section is intended to inspire people to submit funny wildlife photos. The category will form a mini-competition in its own right and will have a very special – and very demanding – jury: the children from Optiks Wichtelwald, Swarovski's company kindergarten in Absam. The prize will be a rucksack packed full of surprises.

The four existing categories are also open to entries. These are Movement and Action, Portrait and Macro, Mammals, and Video. In order to qualify,

images must be digital pictures or footage featuring animals in their natural habitat which have been produced using a digital camera or smartphone attached to the eyepiece of a spotting scope or binocular.

The best 15 photos and five videos will be published on www.digiscoperoftheyear.com. One winner will be named for each category and from these the overall winner will be chosen. The competition is open to amateur and professional photographers alike and will be judged by an international panel including *Birdwatch* Managing Editor Dominic Mitchell.

The top prize is a complete set of digiscoping equipment comprising an ATX or STX eyepiece module, 25-60x85 objective module, digiscoping adapter, spotting scope rail,

tripod, and tripod head. In addition to this, for the first time ever, this year the winner will receive an engraved trophy, which will be made in the Swarovski apprentice workshops in Absam. The three other category winners will each receive an EL 32 binocular. There will also be a publication fee of €300 for each image published.

Each month during the competition, a selection of photos and videos will be uploaded to Facebook (www.facebook.com/swarovskioptik.nature). Fans are then encouraged to 'like' their favourites, and at the end of the month the most popular video and three most popular photos will win a high-quality Swarovski jacket or a PA-i5 adapter for iPhone 5/5s.

The competition is open

to submissions; go to www.digiscoperoftheyear.com for further information and to submit your entries. Winning entries will be announced in the December 2015 issue of *Birdwatch*. This special edition will also feature a stunning 2016 calendar showcasing some of the best photos submitted to this year's competition. ■

DATES TO REMEMBER

- **Closing date for submissions:** 30 September.
- **Judging period:** 1-18 October.
- **Announcement of winners:** *Birdwatch* December (on sale 26 November)

www.digiscoperoftheyear.com

Tips, tricks and techniques: get the most out of digiscoping



Whether you're just starting out or already a digiscoping whizz, our tips and tricks will help you improve your technique, while well-known digiscopers talk about some of their favourite images.

Digiscoping is a simple enough concept: hold a camera to a spotting scope's lens and take a photo. It can be used for everything from taking record shots of rare or unusual species to creating photographic works of art.

For birders probably the most important benefit of digiscoping is the ability to take long-distance photos without potentially disturbing birds or having to shell out for expensive camera equipment. But there's much more to the technique than firing off a few record shots – as useful as that might be.

Getting started

This is the easy bit! Most birders will already have the essential basic equipment: a spotting scope and a compact camera, or even a phone with a decent camera. This simple set-up will allow anyone to take long-distance photos, without investing in a telephoto lens. A tripod keeps the whole set-up stable, while there are various adapters and cables that can be used to improve the images.

Bird photography isn't easy, though. These are small, fast-moving creatures that can be difficult to

capture on camera. It's best to start with slower-moving subjects – farm animals or pets are a good bet. Or head to a local park where the wildfowl will be much more confiding, giving more time to set up the equipment and line up a shot.

Alignment is the most important part of taking good photos, and can be achieved with patience and practice. The camera lens needs to be closely aligned with the scope's eyepiece. It is very hard to achieve this by hand-holding, so digiscopers use adapters to connect the two pieces of equipment. Many



1



2



PHIL LOCKER

1 Digiscoping using your telescope requires decent optics, a sturdy tripod, an adapter, a cheap camera or smartphone and your patience and imagination.

2 The very compliant Staffordshire Red-footed Falcon which spent part of the summer at Chatterley Whitfield was photographed here using an iPhone 6+ and Swarovski ATS scope and adapter, and shows the incredible results that can be achieved without a standalone camera.



Above: a Swarovski ATX85 scope fitted with the DCB2 base and a Nikon P300 – a typical high-end digiscoping set-up.

Below: the Swarovski DCB2-1 digital camera base provides sturdy support for your compact camera.



3



PETE ANTROBUS

digiscopers make their own adapters, but there are also several available to buy.

Fit the adapter to the scope's eyepiece. The camera then attaches to the adapter. If your camera has an extendable zoom, make sure it is far enough away from the scope's eyepiece that it can be extended without damaging the scope. Turn the camera on and use the adapter to bring the camera and eyepiece into alignment. Use the zoom to eliminate any vignetting – the black lines around the image.

Now you're ready to start taking photos. Pick a bright day with little or no wind, and try to keep the sun behind you. Starting off in a hide will make it much easier to view the camera's screen. Use the spotting scope to focus on your subject, then autofocus the camera and start snapping away.



Above: you can increase your scope and camera set-up's reach further by attaching the Swarovski TLS APO-1 telephoto lens.
Below: another great digiscoping set-up, using the Swarovski ATX85 scope, a DCB2 digital camera base and the Nikon P300.

Equipment

In addition to the three basic products – telescope, camera and tripod – there are various pieces of equipment that can help improve your digiscoping. An adapter is necessary to properly align camera and scope, cut down on vignetting and free up your hands. Many optics manufacturers produce adapters to specifically fit their own scopes, while universal adapters are also available and it is possible to make your own.

Camera shake caused by pressing the shutter button can ruin an otherwise good photo. Using a shutter release cable or the camera's self-time mode will help eliminate this.

3 This Ring-billed Gull shot was taken at Preston Marina, Lancashire, on 4 August, using a handheld Samsung S3 through a Swarovski HD 60x30 scope.



KINGFISHER by Jason Ward

THIS photo took true passion to get. Many people were telling me where to go to take decent photos of Kingfisher, but I wanted to nail a digiscoped image on my patch, Amwell Nature Reserve in Hertfordshire. I felt so intensely about getting this shot, that the more people told me to go elsewhere the more I refused. The first day drew a blank, with only Wren, Grey Heron, Common Coot and Moorhen. On the second day I was so hopeful – the weather was good and birds were flitting about. As the day drew on it was looking less and less likely, and again by the end of the day nothing. Day three and by mid-morning: BINGO! A Kingfisher on the post where I had had my scope set for the last two days! I was shaking with excitement and screaming inside with sheer delight. I'd got what I was after and I'd got the image in the place I wanted which is also a place I truly love. Just brilliant! ■



When it comes to choosing a scope, the size and quality of the eyepiece is one of the most important factors; it is essential to get one with a large eyepiece lens, as this will help reduce vignetting and transmit more light to the camera. ED glass and a bigger objective lens will also increase light transmission.

The two things to consider when buying a camera are image quality and zoom. The higher the pixel count, the higher the image quality will be, with 4 MP the minimum resolution required. A good optical zoom is needed. As a general rule, it is worth getting a camera with a front lens element that is smaller than the eyepiece on your telescope, so take your scope with you when buying a camera. A camera with a

full manual mode is preferable as it is much more adaptable to the conditions.

A stable set-up is crucial to taking good images. The slightest movement is increased when digiscoping due to the high magnification of the scope combined with the optical zoom of the camera. Remember that the addition of a camera will both make your set-up heavier than the scope alone and change the centre of balance – a good, sturdy tripod and fluid head are required.

Honing your skills

The best way to improve your digiscoping skills is to get to know your way around your camera. Many compact cameras have scene modes, which adjust the default settings to fit particular conditions. Some of these lend themselves well to producing good digiscoped results; try out the different modes



GREAT KISKADEE by Sharon Stiteler

THE Rio Grande Valley is one of my favourite places to bird and digiscope. The kiskadee is an icon in both sound and beauty for the valley. This bird popped up on a trail at Estero Llano Grande. Part of the key to a great image is getting in a position where the bird has a background that highlights the bird's colours. The blue sky against the rusty red back and yellow breast was the perfect combination. I was only able to snap about 15 images with my Nikon V1, TLS APO adapter and Swarovski ATX85, but I love the over-the-shoulder look I got from this bird. It epitomises the sassy nature of this species. ■

BUILDING SKILLS

4



4 This juvenile Mediterranean Gull (with Black-headed Gulls behind) was digiscoped at Flamborough, East Yorkshire, on 4 August, on the beach at Danes Dyke. The image was captured with a Swarovski ATX95 scope and Sony WX200 camera and shows the clarity and sharpness which can be achieved using the equipment now available.

to see which work best for you. A full understanding of the camera's manual mode will give you much greater control over your images.

US-based digiscoper Tara Tanaka is a two-time winner of Swarovski's Digiscoper of the Year award. She advises: "Practicing often so that you can line up the scope where you want it, focus quickly and adjust your settings without having to look at the camera will make a big difference in the shots you get."

"It's easy to get 'tunnel vision' when you're looking through the viewfinder, but lifting your eyes and taking a quick look around now and then often reveals something more spectacular than what's already in your viewfinder."

Ensuring enough light gets to your camera's sensor is paramount with digiscoping. Using a scope lessens the amount of light delivered – although this can be improved somewhat by choosing the right scope. The two functions to consider are aperture and ISO. The former sets the opening of the objective

lens, thus controlling the amount of light reaching the camera's sensor. The ISO value represents the light sensitivity of the image sensor.

When digiscoping the aperture can't be changed – it's set by the field of view and objective lens diameter of your scope. This means you'll need to adjust the ISO settings. Experiment with different ISOs to find the best one without generating too much noise. The higher the ISO number is, the more sensitive the image sensor is and the brighter the pictures that you can take.

The single piece of advice that all experts give, though, is simply: practice, practice, practice! So next time you're out in the field, why not give digiscoping a go? ■



LANCEOLATED WARBLER by Mark Andrews



I adore *Locustellas*, especially these particular streaky little terrestrial skulkers when they start to arrive on passage through north-east China. The first always causes excitement for what may follow. They're not really a digiscoper's bird, they are just too close. Only when spooked do they fly up and perch, often remaining motionless for some time. This bird decided to drop onto a vegetated stone wall, in great light and a classic 'frozen' body position. I like this shot because it shows the features to look for in identifying the species and, for a change, there's nothing in the way! ■

BROAD-BILLED MOTMOT by Tim Appleton



THIS photo of a Broad-billed Motmot was taken during a recent trip to the Colombian Birdfair using the new Swarovski iPhone 5s adapter mounted on an ATX Swarovski scope with a 65 mm objective lens. The motmot took some finding despite being quite widespread and common, as they are amazingly difficult to find in dense jungle, like many of the species which inhabit dense tropical forest. This was my first attempt at digiscoping using Swarovski's lightweight travel equipment, and I found it to be extremely easy to use and adaptable to many birding situations. The iPhone adapter can be fitted to your scope very quickly and can be kept attached to your phone in readiness, while a 65 mm objective lens is more than adequate for forest photography ■



Digiscoping can be performed with any smartphone, but this recommended combination of the Swarovski PA-i6 adapter, the ATX scope, and an up-to-date iPhone 6 is a market leader.



Take great photos and share them online!



JASON WARD

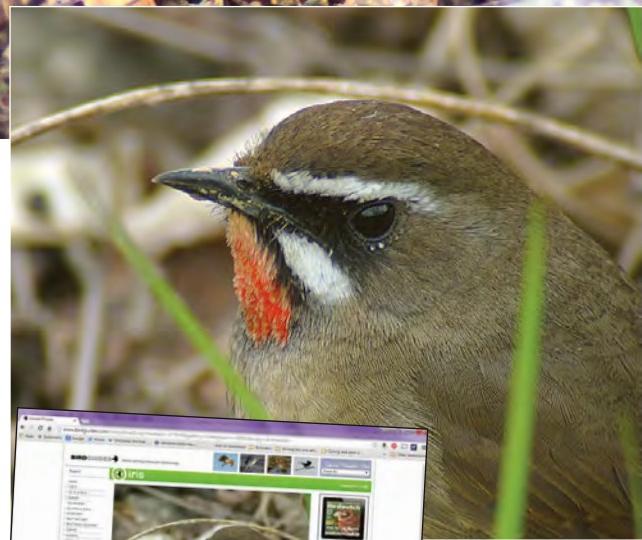
It's possible to capture stunning bird images with digiscoping, like this Hawfinch (above) and Siberian Rubythroat (right).

If you've been inspired by the stunning photos, equipment advice and expert tips and tricks in this *Decade of Digiscoping* supplement, it's time to start taking great images – and why not share them for others to enjoy, too? At **BirdGuides.com**, one of the world's biggest birding communities, we'd love to see your favourite photos.

It's free to register and easy to upload to the Iris galleries at **BirdGuides.com** – simply click 'Upload picture', select 'Birds' or an alternative gallery, click 'Choose file' to find your image

on your computer, then click 'Submit'. Once you've added basic details such as species name, location and date, simply click 'Submit' again and we'll do the rest!

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MARK ANDREWS



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